

A STUDY OF THE WRITINGS OF  
PHILIPPE JACCOTTET

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the creative writings of the Swiss-French poet Philippe Jaccottet (born in 1925) in four decades - from the 1940's to the 1970's - including in its coverage all his works published up until 1980. It is, to date, the only comprehensive study of his poetry, his prose writings, and his notebooks.

Each of Jaccottet's works is introduced and interpreted in turn, in terms of the influence on him of other writers, and in terms of the relationships between his various books. Often individual poems are considered in detail, with reference to their sources of inspiration and in the light of comparable passages in the prose-works. These are also discussed at length.

There emerges from this study a picture of the evolution of Jaccottet's themes, ideas, and styles - of how the poetic and spiritual quest which he embarked on in his youth has been subsequently developed and modified and continued.

## SOMMAIRE (Version française)

Cette dissertation étudie les écrits littéraires du poète suisse-français Philippe Jaccottet (né en 1925) des années 1940 aux années 1970, embrassant ainsi toutes ses oeuvres publiées avant 1980. Elle représente, à l'heure actuelle, la seule étude complète de sa poésie, de ses oeuvres en prose, et de ses carnets.

Chacune des oeuvres de Jaccottet est présentée et interprétée à son tour, en fonction de l'influence exercée sur lui par d'autres écrivains, et des rapports étroits qui existent entre ses livres. Souvent un poème particulier reçoit un examen détaillé qui tient compte de ses sources d'inspiration et de pages comparables dans les oeuvres en prose. Celles-ci font également le sujet de longs commentaires.

Il ressort de cette étude une image de l'évolution des thèmes, des idées, et des styles de Jaccottet. On y voit comment la quête poétique et spirituelle qu'il avait entreprise dans sa jeunesse s'est développée, modifiée, et poursuivie par la suite.

## INTRODUCTION

"Je ne prétends pas que beaucoup puissent se délecter de l'oeuvre de Jaccottet. Elle exige, pour être appréciée, des goûts qui ne sont pas universels: l'amour d'une belle langue, de ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler la nature, et une certaine manière de sentir..." So wrote Jean Lestavel at the start of his article "Avez-vous lu Philippe Jaccottet?"<sup>1</sup>

Jaccottet has indeed not gained a wide following, but he has succeeded - better than most poets born in the 1920's - in attracting a body of readers who value his work. Some evidence of his literary reputation is the issue of La Revue de Belles-Lettres (3-4, 1975) offered to him on his fiftieth birthday: those participating in this homage include the important older writers Ponge, Guillevic and Arland, the noted critic Starobinski, and poets of his own generation like Bonnefoy, du Bouchet, Gaspar, Réda, Charles Tomlinson and Cid Corman. Evidence of this kind could be multiplied;<sup>2</sup> but of course the current standing of a living poet is no proof of lasting merit. What counts in the long run is the quality of his writings themselves, which this study will investigate.

This is the first doctoral dissertation to be devoted to Jaccottet. It may not seem justifiable to those who ignore or dislike his work (though few would dispute that he has written more and better than some dead minor poets on whom theses have been done). The somewhat dismissive opinion of G.D. Martin, "Jaccottet's poetry is perhaps slight, but communicates the

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1. In La Vie spirituelle, July-August 1973, pp.573-582.

2. Two of the most important prizes he has received are the Montaigne-Preis of 1972 and the Prix Valéry Larbaud of 1978. The most notable critical essay on him is in J.-P. Richard's Onze études sur la poésie moderne, 1964.



authentic frisson",<sup>3</sup> may possibly prove correct. It must be conceded, at least, that the issues which Jaccottet thinks really matter do not interest everyone; that he appears on occasion intellectual, passive, and finicky; that he says little about human society; that his descriptive powers are not matched by any great skill in narration; and that his earnestness is not tempered with light-hearted humour. Besides, the lack of technical novelties in his work tends to count against him - writers with a genius for invention are more likely to win disciples and attract the attention of literary historians (some of whom seem to value innovation as much as technologists do).

But despite all this, Jaccottet has some claims to being more than a minor writer. His work has both bulk and scope - though not huge, it covers various genres, both prose and verse, and spans thirty-five years, during which time it has not ceased to evolve. More important, it has a remarkable unity, as this study will try to show, a coherence that resides in the author's individual voice and his constant preoccupations, and which is not weakened by the different styles adopted at different moments. The unity of tone seems to proceed from the integrity of the author's personality, from a sensitivity that is a quality of both feeling and language. The constant preoccupations are a scrutiny of literature and art, particularly an inquiry into the essence of poetry; an observation of the visible world, notably of certain landscapes at chosen times of day; and a reflection on questions

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3. Anthology of Contemporary French Poetry, Edinburgh 1972, p.203.

of life and death. For these reasons his works never cease to illuminate one another, so that the numerous often fragmentary ouvrages together form a single oeuvre.

More important than that unity, and yet more contestable, is the depth of his personal vision. Jaccottet's "certaine manière de sentir" is finely developed. A high receptivity to culture and experience enables him to gain poetic insights of unusual intensity. And he communicates them with great articulateness and artistry: his handling of words shows always a special delicacy and a refreshing purity - and attains sometimes a grave poignancy that few writers ever achieve. This would not have occurred without a peculiar tenacity (the cost of which is sometimes repetition and obsessiveness); it is the fruit of a persistence in refusing superficial thought and entertaining language. And though Jaccottet will probably prove less influential than more sociable, more protean writers, he may well be respected as a cultured man of letters and a gifted poet. It is possible that readers in the distant future may find (as I have done, distant in space) that his discreet voice seems to speak to human ears and not just to dead paper, that his style is accessible and appealing, and that one can read and willingly reread his poetry, and later even return to it with renewed appreciation.

This study hopes to show, indeed, how his works reward close reading. Unlike some modern criticism, it seeks to remain subordinate to the literary text. And yet at times it may serve it badly. Poetry is not, after all, written to be analysed; and most poets share Jaccottet's own dislike of university criticism. Prosaic commentary is actually more

likely to do damage in his case than in most, because of his theme of lightness, his concern not to lean too heavily on experiences of delicate beauty:

... Ne faut-il pas plutôt  
laisser monter aux murs le silencieux lierre  
de peur qu'un mot de trop...<sup>4</sup>

The particular pitfall here - and one not entirely avoided in Clerval's long essay on Jaccottet - is to present fragile and ephemeral intuitions as fixed doctrines, and artistic works of enquiry as didactic parables.

I can only hope to be aware of this danger, admitting that I am unlikely to escape it. A general caution must therefore be given at this point about the direct quotations which will at times give this study the appearance of a "Jaccottet par lui-même": namely that this author's words often seem more assertive and didactic in brief quotations than in their original contexts, where propositions are often preceded by diffident or attenuating preambles such as "il m'arrive de croire parfois que..." This is because he eschews at once the opinionated tone and the aphoristic style. It is such a common trait that to quote full sentences would often clutter my exposition; and such a characteristic one that it merited this introductory note.

Perhaps my decision to concentrate on a single writer should be commented on also. The period of the 1950's and 1960's was one of individualities rather than movements in poetry. As Jean Onimus says:

Une étude sur la poésie actuelle ne peut se présenter que sous la forme de monographies (...) les classements traditionnels par "écoles" ou "tendances" ne

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4. "Le Secret", from L'Ignorant, in Poésie 1946-67, p.58.

sont guère éclairants: ils introduisent de fausses catégories.<sup>5</sup>

Now Jaccottet is probably a more solitary figure than most. Despite his numerous literary acquaintances, and his affinities with some other contemporary poets such as Bonnefoy, his writings display (and acknowledge) greater debts to literature of the past, often to works not written in French at all. To view his oeuvre in its own terms seems essential to total comprehension, although it makes objective judgement more difficult.

The objects of this thesis can be summarized as follows: to introduce and interpret Jaccottet's creative works; to show the place of each in the spiritual autobiography which together they constitute; and to make critical evaluations of them. The poems receive the closest attention - they are viewed in terms of their sources of inspiration and the light shed on them by the author's other writings. His creative prose-works are also discussed at length; but a full study of his criticism or of his translations is not attempted.

A chronological approach has been adopted. This seems the surest way to avoid anachronisms of interpretation while following the meandering itinerary of the author's thoughts. It serves, above all, to emphasize the gradual evolution of Jaccottet's unfinished oeuvre. This approach contrasts with the predominantly synchronic one found in the major essays on his work (by Jean-Pierre Richard, Peter Broome, Jacques Borel and others) and in Alain Clerval's monograph. Impressive as these all are, they do not seek to give a comprehensive coverage of Jaccottet's writings - and so my debts to them are not

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5. La Connaissance poétique, 1966, p.11.

great. Nor have I been guided by any specific critical doctrine, preferring to remain conservative and eclectic.

One defect of the chronological approach - it plods - should be alleviated by chapter one, which attempts a brief and uncluttered overview of the ground to be traversed. This chapter is the revised text of a paper given at the 18th Congress of the Australasian Universities' Language and Literature Association.<sup>6</sup>

Chapters two to four deal with Jaccottet's early career, up until 1956, looking at the traditions and influences that helped to mould his individuality, and showing how his poetic enterprise took shape and began to bear fruit.

Chapter five deals with his major writings of the 1960's, examining the ways in which that poetic enterprise came to be modified and continued and developed. The chief emphasis here is on the mature prose-works; but there is also a long discussion of the poems of Airs - part of this appeared in 1978 as an article: "Jaccottet and the masters of Haiku".<sup>7</sup>

As for the final chapter, it concentrates on the three-part collection of poetry A la lumière d'hiver, so that this study includes in its coverage all of Jaccottet's writings published up until 1980.

Quotations from Jaccottet's works will be taken from their original editions, with the following important exceptions. Since most of L'Effraie et autres poésies, L'Ignorant, and Airs, and all of Leçons appear in the convenient volume Poésie 1946-1967 (1971), which is freely available in the "Poésie/Gallimard" series, page-numbers refer to this selected

6. Held in Wellington, New Zealand, in January 1977.

7. In the Australian Journal of French Studies, 1978, pp.214-223.

edition, even for Leçons, which has since appeared in a revised form. For Chants d'en bas, the more recent augmented version has been chosen - as is the case also for La Promenade sous les arbres and La Semaïson.

The following abbreviations have been adopted:

P/E. = L'Effraie... (1953) in Poésie 1946-1967, Gallimard, 1971.

Prom. = La Promenade sous les arbres (1957), 2nd edition, Mermod, Lausanne, 1961.

P/I. = L'Ignorant (1959) in Poésie 1946-67, Gallimard, 1971.

El. = Eléments d'un songe, Gallimard, 1961.

Obs. = L'Obscurité, Gallimard, 1961.

Sem. = La Semaïson (1963, expanded 1971), Gallimard, 1971.

P/A. = Airs (1967) in Poésie 1946-1967, Gallimard, 1971.

P/L. = Leçons (1969) in Poésie 1946-1967, Gallimard, 1971.

Pay. = Paysages avec figures absentes, Gallimard, 1970.

Ver. = A travers un verger, Fata morgana, Montpellier, 1975.

Lum/C. = Chants d'en bas (1974) in A la lumière d'hiver, Gallimard, 1977.

Lum. = A la lumière d'hiver, Gallimard, 1977.

Jou. = Journées, Payot, Lausanne, 1977.

NRF = La Nouvelle Revue Française

Clerval = Alain Clerval: Philippe Jaccottet, Seghers, 1976  
(Poètes d'aujourd'hui, no.228).

I wish to record my thanks to Philippe Jaccottet for granting two long interviews, to David Bancroft for much valuable advice and criticism, and to Helen Deverson for typing all this.

Peter Low

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## CHAPTER I

### POETRY AND DESPAIR

One of the central themes of Jaccottet's work is formulated in these four words from his notebooks:

faut-il vraiment désespérer? (Sem, p.25, Nov. 1959)

That question, which in various forms has dominated all his books, was the question that started him writing poetry in the first place. It arose during his adolescence, in the commonplace anxieties of a sensitive person learning that he is alive and mortal. These anxieties received encouragement from the historical moment - the Second World War being then in progress. They were nourished also by his intensive reading of modern writers in French and German, those writers (such as Rilke) whom we tend to call serious or grave. In European literature from as far back as Hölderlin he found a deep sense of loss and ruin.<sup>1</sup> The bitter or elegiac tones adopted by these writers, along with the difficulties of their lives (ending sometimes in madness or suicide) do indeed prompt the question: "vraiment?"

In Jaccottet's case we can speak of an initial and fundamental sombreness - his own word for it is "incertitude".<sup>2</sup>

The world seems false, unharmonious, incomprehensible - God is

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1. Jaccottet noted in May 1972: "Presque toutes les voix volontairement ou non prophétiques depuis cent ans parlent de fin (...) Un mouvement de naufrage ou de chute: Leopardi, Baudelaire, mais aussi Trakl. Le sentiment, presque la certitude de la mort imminente" (Jou, p.50).
  2. His acceptance speech for the Montaigne-Preis is entitled "A la source, une incertitude". The term "pessimism" is less appropriate because it suggests defeatism.

absent, society is meaningless, and ideologies offer no refuge, not even those which try to analyze this alienation and inauthenticity. But besides that absurd train of thought Jaccottet had also presentiments of something different, something truer, glimpses of harmony and plenitude. These were transient, passive experiences, which seemed to give special understanding of reality, but could not be easily talked about.<sup>3</sup> And he felt that poets, the people who best echoed his anxieties, also came closest to rendering such moments of illumination - closer, certainly, than philosophers and theologians. He puts it this way: "A mon inquiétude, à mes doutes, à mon ignorance, ce qui s'oppose le mieux, ce n'est ni un traité sur la Sagesse, ni un sermon sur Dieu(...) mais bien(...)quelque poème long ou bref, ce poème ne serait-il à son tour qu'une question..." Or again: "la poésie ne serait-elle pas justement ce qui nous empêche de croire tout à fait à l'absurde".<sup>4</sup> That is not of course a claim made for poetry of all kinds, or poetry as an end in itself; rather it is a claim for poetry as a means towards transcendence, a reference to those insights into beauty and truth carried by great poetry and perhaps by nothing else. Or, to put it another way, true poetry is inspired by something mysterious, beyond our limited grasp: "L'illimité est le souffle qui nous anime (...) La poésie est la parole que ce souffle alimente et porte, d'où son pouvoir sur nous" (Sem, p.39, March 1960).

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3. As such they fit William James's definition of "mystical states of consciousness" (The Varieties of Religious Experience, 1902, pp.380-2 - but the term "mystical" is misleading insofar as it implies a sense of union with God.

4. El, p.152 and a note in Pour l'art, 1950.



Thus the poetry which Jaccottet values helps him not to despair. In his essays, he consistently views poetry as a spiritual activity, not a ludic one; he is not interested in pure literary excellence, or in linguistic experiment, having no wish to move poetry further away from its religious origins. And his own poetry-writing, at once modest and pretentious, proceeds from this view. He has stated his motivation in these terms: "J'ai envie de parler, peut-être sans savoir pourquoi, peut-être parce que je sens que j'ai touché la merveille, et qu'il me faut le dire aux autres pour qu'ils cessent de désespérer" (El, p.137).

The title of this chapter, "Poetry and Despair", is meant to be an antithesis - Jaccottet sees poetry as a sort of "contre-poison", an antidote to despair. Fundamentally dualistic, his work is a debate between hope and doubt, or a combat between light and dark,<sup>5</sup> or - in another metaphor - a weighing in the scales. The following passage comes from one of Jaccottet's more recent books:

J'ai toujours eu dans l'esprit, sans bien m'en rendre compte, une sorte de balance. Sur un plateau, il y avait la douleur, la mort, sur l'autre la beauté de la vie. Le premier portait toujours un poids beaucoup plus lourd, le second, presque rien que de l'impondérable. Mais il m'arrivait de croire que l'impondérable pût l'emporter, par moments... la plupart des pages que j'ai écrites sont sous le signe de cette pesée, de cette oscillation.<sup>6</sup>

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5. There are literal debates in his books, e.g. Prom, pp.95-103 and El, pp.148-158. The poem "Le Combat inégal" is in P/I, pp.77-8; but as Clerval says (p.13): "L'interrogation perpétuelle autour du combat que se livrent les puissances de la nuit et les armes scintillantes de la lumière traverse toute l'oeuvre".
  6. A travers un verger, 1975, pp.25-6. Another very dualistic passage speaks of "la pensée que, malgré les apparences chaque année plus contraires, plus atroces (...) tout n'était pas vain ni indifférent, qu'il y avait un bien et un mal (même s'ils n'étaient pas exactement ce que les autres croyaient ou prétendaient); donc, d'une certaine manière, un haut et un bas, la possibilité de se conduire

At times he has indeed thought that the counterbalancing succeeded, that it was not ridiculous and vain to weigh the ponderous against the imponderable. And at other times he has dreamt of somehow reconciling these opposites.

The stance which Jaccottet adopts as a writer, typically a patient attentiveness, is meant to help him seize the momentary illuminations that come his way, so that their mystery does have its maximum weight. He is a poet not of escape or revolt but of vigilance.<sup>7</sup>

About his undertaking three general remarks may be made at this point. One is that anxiety and fascination with death is in Jaccottet a premise, a point of departure. He does not like some writers announce the death of God or the bankruptcy of European culture as if those were startling discoveries. "Le spectacle ennuyeux de l'immortel péché" is merely axiomatic and uninteresting. In an early essay<sup>8</sup> he alludes to the more nihilistic post-war writers in saying "pour arpenter notre misère, d'autres s'en chargent". While agreeing with their assessment that "ce qui nous reste est peu de chose...nous sommes sans force, le pire peut se produire", he immediately adds: "Tout cela est d'ailleurs si évident que je préfère ne pas m'y attarder. D'autres tâches nous attendent". Rather than counting losses he wishes to gather evidence on the credit side. "Notre misère" is real enough (other words for it are "le vide", "le gouffre", "la ruine", "l'abîme", "la

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6. (contd) sur ce qui nous exaltait, d'éviter ou de rejeter ce qui nous abaissait" (Obs., p.89).

7. The poem "Le Travail du poète" (P/I, p.64) begins by rejecting "rêver" and "pleurer" in favour of "veiller".

8. In NRF, Jan. 1954, pp.176-8.

mort", and "la douleur"); but "le mystère subsiste, et dans le mystère l'entrevison du salut, de la victoire toujours possible". This concentration on the redeeming mystery gives to the question "faut-il désespérer?" a different wording, which is: "Que reste-t-il?" In this we could perhaps call Jaccottet a post-modern writer.

It must also be said, however, that his view of poetry as a spiritual quest stands in a long tradition. Romantics and post-romantics have seen art as a search for some absolute knowledge; but they were not the first to do so. When Jaccottet declares: "C'est le Tout-autre que l'on cherche à saisir" (Sem, p.39, March 1960), he shows his proximity to the mystics of former centuries (and to some contemporaries too, such as Bonnefoy, for whom poetry is a sort of Gnostic quest for Being). Jaccottet takes seriously all those who report moments when "Le voile qui nous sépare d'ordinaire du réel se déchira", differing from them mainly by his extreme uncertainty. He accepts the fascination of such an experience, while questioning its authority: "comment ce mirage est-il possible, et comment n'aurait-il pas, même en tant que mirage, un sens? (...) n'avons-nous pas le devoir, ou au moins le droit, d'écouter en nous cette très profonde, irrésistible nostalgie, comme si vraiment elle disait quelque chose d'important et de vrai?" (Sem, p.21, Nov. 1959).

A third general remark is that the real world is where Jaccottet seeks the mysterious. Although willing to use religious words where others seem inadequate, he grows increasingly sceptical about language that is metaphysical or other-worldly. He writes first and foremost of what he calls "l'immédiat", the visible world. This is most obvious in his

notebooks, which have some affinity with the poetry of Ponge, though they are less materialistic and treat landscapes rather than objects. Jaccottet is no visionary: he is a poet of place, of one place (Grignan) where he has made his home; and his preferred subjects - trees, birds, seasons, times of day, effects of light - are taken from that particular locus. He is thus not really the abstract, bookish writer he may sometimes appear to be, but a combination: he may be seen as a meditator whose anxious thoughts impel him to seek illumination outside himself, or conversely as a contemplator of things for whom the natural world nourishes a reflection about mystery and death.

Let us now look briefly at Jaccottet's books, the poetry more than the prose, in order to trace the theme of despair at its most explicit.

The first important works are L'Effraie and L'Ignorant, comprising elegant verse-poems notable for their sense of the fragile and the mysterious. The title-poem of L'Ignorant displays very well the author's grave melancholy of tone, and philosophical doubt. Line 9 states the key question:

que reste-t-il? Que reste-t-il à ce mourant  
qui l'empêche si bien de mourir...

which might be morbid but for the "si bien". The final line gives a tentative and ambiguous non-answer: "la faute et la beauté des bois en cendres".<sup>9</sup> Other poems venture answers of similar fragility, such as this:

Ce qui change même la mort en ligne blanche  
au petit jour, l'oiseau le dit à qui l'écoute. (P/I, p.58)

Since disclosing a secret would destroy it, Jaccottet speaks

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9. P/I, p.63. A clue to its meaning is in Prom, p.133: "loué soit l'amour qui fait s'élever la louange sur la faute..."

of his intuitions in negative terms: "l'impondérable",  
 "l'invisible", "l'illimité", "l'inattendu", "l'insaisissable".  
 He speaks to hear

... non pas dieu,  
 mais quelque chose qu'on eût pris pour lui peut-être  
 en un monde moins incertain que celui-ci.<sup>10</sup>

Because these mysteries seem essentially ephemeral, Jaccottet cannot make them a basis for religious belief. They are matters for poetry not dogmatism; they must be relived by each person<sup>11</sup> - and yet they offer the best hope he can find.

The last part of L'Ignorant, entitled "Le Livre des morts", is a sequence of unusual solemnity treating old age and death, and suggesting that a man need not approach that threshold completely empty-handed: "Certains feux sont de ceux que nulle ombre ne peut réduire" (P/I, p.89). Without being optimistic, "Le Livre des morts" shows Jaccottet at his most fervent, and represents the height of his confidence in the magic of poetry. The measured, whispering style speaks for that too:

Offrande (...) soit offerte au pauvre mort:

Une seule tremblante tige de roseau cueillie au bord  
 d'une eau rapide; un seul mot prononcé par celle  
 qui fut pour lui le souffle, le bois tendre et l'étincelle;  
 un souvenir de la lumière tout en haut de l'air...

Et que par ces trois coups légers lui soit ouvert  
 l'espace sans espace où toute souffrance s'efface  
 la clarté sans clarté de l'inimaginable face. (P/I, p.90)

After 1956 there is a break in Jaccottet's poetry-writing, a five-year silence due to a spiritual crisis that undermined his confidence in the potency of words.<sup>12</sup> One of his prose-

10. L'Ignorant, p.52. For poems of L'Effraie and L'Ignorant not collected in Poésie 1946-1967, footnotes referring to the first edition will be used.

11. See for example Sem, p.20 (Nov. 1959).

12. The note of 1961 appended to Prom (pp.140 ff) explains

works of this period, a sort of novel called L'Obscurité, uses a fictional, almost mythic character to give the fullest expression of the author's despair: this is a middle-aged philosopher suddenly seized by a death-wish who abandons his family and everything he ever stood for; he is "attaqué par le désespoir comme par une maladie" (Obs, p.12) and he dies of it - no alternative diagnosis is offered. The first half of the book presents his monologue of surrender, words of darkness before death - and here Jaccottet fails eloquently to avoid nihilism. The second half is an attempt at balancing: in it the other character, a younger man, tries to get to the heart of the case, to find out "si le malheur pouvait être évité, ou... s'il est fatal que l'homme lucide s'effondre" (Obs, p.156). The author, typically, gives no definite answer. The man's spiritual suicide may well be a logical step, but it seems too definite - can one believe in logic? In Jaccottet's notebooks of the time, which bear witness to the same intense soul-searching, he asks: "N'est-ce pas le fait d'un esprit borné que de refuser de croire à l'énigme qui nous attire et nous éclaire? Est-il plus juste de ne croire qu'à l'ossement, à la ruine?" (Sem, p.21, Nov. 1959) And he declares:

je prends appui sur ce dont je ne puis douter,  
le doute... (Sem, p.24, Nov. 1959)

Agnosticism is its own safeguard.

The period of L'Obscurité is followed by one of lightness, in the double sense of "clarté" and "légèreté" - revealed in the collection of poems called Airs. They begin with these

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12.(contd) how for four years he couldn't write a satisfactory poem. This was all the more distressing because of his view that poetry proceeds from contact with true reality (see El, p.155).

lines:

Peu de chose, rien qui chasse  
l'effroi de perdre l'espace  
est laissé à l'âme errante (P/A, p.95)

which restate his basic lack of confidence. In Airs, however, Jaccottet concentrates more exclusively on that "peu de chose", in poems that are his most purely lyrical, such as this one:

Sérénité

L'ombre qui est dans la lumière  
pareille à une fumée bleue (P/A, p.147)

That is all - and the other poems are not much longer. Few say anything discursive about the problem of despair, since they wish to state only what belongs with the moment of illumination, matching by their brevity of style its immediacy and ephemerality. Here is another poem:

Dans l'étendue  
plus rien que des montagnes miroitantes  
Plus rien que d'ardents regards  
qui se croisent  
Merles et ramiers (P/A, p.134)

Such images of flight, weightlessness and open space can be understood in opposition to the unstated burden of mortality.

The Airs represent an exceptionally serene moment in Jaccottet's career. In the years since then, he has given more attention to the negative side of the balance, the reasons for despairing. He has become more sceptical about the power of poetry to convey experiences of insight, and sometimes more sceptical about those experiences themselves.

This change is announced at the beginning of Leçons with the ironic words: "Autrefois / j'ai prétendu guider mourants et morts..."<sup>13</sup> By contrast, things are now not so simple, not so light:

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13. P/L, p.160, referring back to "Le Livre des morts".

Misère

comme une montagne sur nous écroulée (P/L, p.171)

The sequence Leçons tells of a death, the advance of death in the body of a respected older man. It happens to be the poet's father-in-law, who was a victim of cancer. The lessons Jaccottet has to recite are sombre ones. Although there is a glimpse of understanding at the end, when the man has died, the catharsis does not outweigh the corpse. Nor does it soften the asperities of style:

Qui se venge, et de quoi, par ce crachat? (P/L, p.175)

Leçons was a difficult work to write, and the intensity it attains is unusual.

Two more recent volumes, Chants d'en bas and A travers un Verger, also sound a tragic note. Confronted again with the cruelty of reality, he writes of the inappropriateness of words:

Parler alors semble mensonge, ou pire: lâche  
insulte à la douleur, et gaspillage  
du peu de temps et de forces qui nous reste. (Lum/C, p.42)

He is almost prompted to stop writing altogether, because of this tilting of the balance:

il y a presque trop  
de poids du côté sombre où je nous vois descendre,  
et redresser avec de l'invisible chaque jour,  
qui le pourrait encore...? (Lum/C, p.59)

And he adds an ironic comment on his former belief in oracular formulae:

s'il y a un mot de passe, ce ne peut être un mot  
qu'il suffirait d'inscrire ici comme une clause  
d'assurance... (Lum/C, p.58)

Yet even here there is a kind of negative consolation in the thought that he has not settled for a false answer.<sup>14</sup>

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14. A travers un verger (p.38) is still repeating the fearful question: "faut-il que l'horreur de la mort contamine toute l'étendue de la vie?"



Poets have always been better at asking questions than answering them. This poet consistently seems to be saying something important, if only his despair of an answer. And he says it well - his own work can take its place alongside that body of poetry which we consider valuable, perhaps for the reasons he gives:

Que reste-t-il? Sinon cette façon de poser la question qui se nomme la poésie et qui est vraisemblablement la possibilité de tirer de la limite même un chant (...) une manière de parler du monde qui n'explique pas le monde, car ce serait le figer et l'anéantir, mais qui le montre tout nourri de son refus de répondre, vivant parce qu'impénétrable, merveilleux parce que terrible... (E1, p.153)

## II

### STUDENT AND NOVICE

This chapter on Jaccottet's formation littéraire up until 1946 must necessarily be concerned with biography - more so than chapters on his later work, since that later work is determined far less by his personal circumstances than by longstanding preoccupations formed precisely during the 1940's. A full understanding of Philippe Jaccottet the poet requires some examination of the young apprentice-writer of those crucial years.

Unfortunately it is here that our information is the most incomplete. The contemporary evidence of his thoughts during adolescence is thin, which leaves us largely dependent on his later passages of self-revelation, found in his essays and speeches. (That L'Obscurité contains much autobiographical material from the 1940's, as Clerval suggests,<sup>1</sup> there can be little doubt - but being fiction, however translucent, it is less use here than Jaccottet's direct confidences.) Of course, an adult reflecting on his youth will necessarily simplify and select, and may state unintentional falsehoods. But at least Jaccottet's own retrospective image of himself is a sincere one: his remarks have a disarming quality that defies suspicion.

Jaccottet comes from Lausanne, the city that overlooks the Léman, which is a lake on the Rhône river and one of the frontiers between Switzerland and France. But his birthplace

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1. Clerval (p.7). Clerval's introduction shows that he asked Jaccottet a number of questions concerning this period.

was the town of Moudon (Vaud), twenty-five kilometres to the north, situated on the Broye river (whose waters eventually join the Rhine) about thirty kilometres from the Franco-Alemannic language frontier. This is why he speaks of himself as "ein Mittelding, ein Zwischenwesen".<sup>2</sup> One of his most vivid memories of Moudon, "la petite ville vieille et sombre à laquelle sont liées les plus anciennes images de ma vie",<sup>3</sup> is of his favourite aunt reading him the Germanic legends of the Nibelungen. (His father was a veterinary surgeon there - the family was bourgeois but not wealthy - until 1933, when he shifted to Lausanne, partly to ensure a good schooling for his son and daughter.)

During his education in Lausanne, from 1933 to 1946, Philippe Jaccottet became aware of the cultural significance of Vaudois citizenship - at a time when the prestigious literary figure of Ramuz was still present asserting the region's cultural identity against the pull of Paris and France in general.<sup>4</sup> Although Jaccottet is not exactly typical of the vigorous race described in Jacques Chessex's Portrait des Vaudois,<sup>5</sup> his sensibility is entirely coherent with the literary tradition of La Suisse Romande which stretches from Rousseau and Constant to Vahé Godel and to Chessex himself:

...à mi-chemin comme nous sommes (comme nous étions en tout cas) entre la clarté latin et le rêve germanique, et plutôt taciturnes, plutôt maladroits,

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2. In Jahrbuch der deutschen Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, Darmstadt 1966, p.84.
  3. In NRF, Jan. 1977, p.92. Various of these images are recorded, forty years afterwards, in Journées pp.69-71 (March 1973). Cf Lum/C, pp.46, 58.
  4. Ramuz's Aimé Pache of 1910 seems, as Jaccottet himself remarks, to "justifier tout essai de création locale" (Gustave Roud, p.18).
  5. Lausanne, Bertil Galland (1972).

trop sérieux, d'autant plus tentés que plus purs (tentations rarement avouées, si combattues quelquefois qu'elles se changent en hantise et conduisent certains jusqu'au suicide...); enfin de vrais protestants.<sup>6</sup>

Those words come from the essay Jaccottet devoted to the poet Gustave Roud, whose home was just nine kilometres from Moudon, and who had been a close collaborator of Ramuz. And they apply equally to Roud and to Jaccottet himself,<sup>7</sup> who during thirty years' residence in France has retained his Swiss citizenship and his association with the literary milieu of Lausanne. His parents and sister still live in Switzerland - or did in 1977 - and his home in Grignan (Drôme) is within twenty kilometres of the Rhône, and much closer to Lausanne than to Paris.

The place of Swiss protestantism in the poet's formation should be neither ignored nor overstated. The Jaccottets were protestants like the Vaudois in general, and one member of the family (a grand-uncle perhaps) had been a pastor; but Philippe's parents were not regular church-goers, and he himself is not a believer. Yet the characteristic moral seriousness of his writings sometimes brings them close to a

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6. Gustave Roud, p.11. Strong support for these generalizations can be found in A. Berchtold's "portrait littéraire et moral" La Suisse romande au cap du XXe siècle (Lausanne, Payot, 1963), or C. Guyot's Ecrivains de Suisse française, (Bern, Francke, 1961), which testify, for example, to the Swiss fondness of "le journal intime". Poetry critics tend to speak of "une poésie repliée sur un climat psychologique (.....) poésie méditative, secrète" (R. Lacôte in Lettres françaises, 7-13 Jan., 1970, p.8); or remark that "la poésie romande se révèle souvent statique, contemplative, introvertie, cérébrale, intemporelle" (V. Godel in Le Thyrses, Bruxelles, July-Aug., 1965). Besides Protestantism, the reasons for this may include geographical and political separateness, and the proximity of the Germanic world.
  7. He has said, speaking chiefly of himself: "Wir (les Suisses français) sind oft schüchtern, verlegen, linkisch auch und von einem schrecklichen Ernst; eher schweigsam als redselig, fast niemals glänzend im Gespräch und in

religious examen de conscience, and their introspective individualism is protestant and not catholic. Jaccottet's ethical tendencies are indebted to Swiss moral traditions, and his references to specifically Christian beliefs and images, though infrequent, show that he had long understood them and respected the insights they contain. For these reasons, he may appropriately be termed a "post-christian" writer. In a retrospective note of 1971, Jaccottet recalls the religious instruction he received in his youth:

Il ne me semble pas que le Christ ait jamais eu pour moi de présence réelle, sensible, même au moment de l'instruction religieuse où je crois plutôt maintenant que le monde divin représentait surtout une autorité invisible, d'ordre moral, quelque chose comme une haute conscience qui vous faisait hésiter de commettre telle une telle faute, en particulier, bien entendu, charnelle. Ce n'était pas seulement une puissance négative, menaçante, contraignante, non; mais une exigence sévère dont le rôle n'était certes pas inutile ou uniquement malsain. Mais enfin, je ne crois pas déformer les choses après coup, c'était bien essentiellement une instruction morale qui nous était donnée là, conformément à l'esprit protestant. Nos pasteurs n'étaient certes pas des visionnaires.<sup>8</sup>

Jaccottet's awakening to poetry seems to have come at the end of his childhood, and to have arisen from some inner personal experiences which he considered very important, but which he found very difficult to elucidate. In 1968, he was to date "presque (....) l'éveil de ma propre conscience

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7. (contd) Gesellschaft; vor allem, zu sehr nach innen gewandt; jedenfalls weniger rasch, präzise und intellektuell begabt als die Franzosen". (Jahrbuch der deutschen Akademie...loc. cit.)

8. Jou, pp.32-3 (May 1971). According to Guyot (op. cit.), the moral sermonizing in Swiss literature prompted somebody to suggest a history: "Du genre ennuyeux et des écrivains romands qui y ont excellé".

poétique" from a speech by Gustave Roud which he heard in June 1941.<sup>9</sup> Not completely, however, since he was already becoming acquainted at that time with "les premiers orages intérieurs" and with "la poésie, qui s'en nourrit".<sup>10</sup>

Jaccottet's early poems do not speak very clearly about these experiences, and indeed make them appear less genuine than they must have been in reality. His first long work, "Pour les Ombres" (1944),<sup>11</sup> speaks of "ma détresse, and declares, "je n'ai pas su dérouter le démon". An even earlier poem "Elégie"<sup>12</sup> says "Mes yeux de joie ont clos à jamais leur paupière" and ends with the question: "Où chercher la main qui me délivre?" A slightly later poem, "Les Iris",<sup>13</sup> ends with the line: "Voici rendu mon corps aux morsures nocturnes". If Jaccottet did not long remain faithful to these romantic expressions of his experiences, he did not break faith with the experiences themselves. In retrospect he has felt that his poems of around 1950 were more true to their "singularité".<sup>14</sup>

Two characteristics they seem to have had are darkness and danger. In a 1956 speech he reminisced thus: "J'ai été très tôt sensible à une présence menaçante, à une sorte d'ombre noire, à une pesanteur qui faisait pression sur cette muraille protectrice dont chacun croyait qu'elle ne pourrait jamais se rompre..."<sup>15</sup> Those words presumably refer to the

9. Gustave Roud, pp.5-7.

10. In Domaine Suisse, Lausanne, Oct.-Nov. 1956, p.63. This is in Jaccottet's own "Prix Rambert" acceptance speech. Here too he recalls Roud's speech of 1941 - and its impact on him has made him attach special importance to such occasions.

11. In Cahiers de Poésie I, Lausanne, Autumn 1944, pp.47-56.

12. In La Suisse Contemporaine, Lausanne, August 1944, pp.685-6.

13. In La Suisse Contemporaine, July 1945, pp.614-5.

14. In NRF, March 1976, p.65.

15. In Domaine Suisse, loc. cit., p.65.

anxieties that provoked him to write Trois poèmes aux démons while he was still under twenty. A biographer or psychoanalyst might wish to seek particular causes for anxiety, in the family situation or the schooling, even particular dramatic events - as if poetry could be provoked only by abnormal experience. Later remarks by Jaccottet suggest that such a search would be vain: "Il y a une tristesse secrète, des démons, une souffrance tragique dans la plupart d'entre nous" he asserted in 1949.<sup>16</sup> And in 1972 he declared "Il n'est pas du tout nécessaire que la vie visible d'un adolescent soit aventureuse pour qu'il connaisse alors des tempêtes".<sup>17</sup> This sentence comes from the speech significantly entitled "A la source, une incertitude" where Jaccottet calls adolescence "cette sorte de seconde naissance où l'être doit se risquer hors de l'enfance, et où ce qu'il découvre, ou plutôt divine, entrevoit, pressent, en lui et hors de lui, tour à tour l'exalte et l'alarme, le précipite dans d'aveugles élans ou le rejette en lui-même dans de vagues ruminations". It continues, after the sentence already quoted:

Longtemps, il a vécu plus ou moins à l'abri, plus ou moins en aveugle; il entrouvre les yeux, trébuche, parfois il tombe: le monde qui lui apparaît brusquement à l'étrangeté des rêves, des versants lumineux, des pans d'ombre, de soudains renversements du jour à la nuit.<sup>18</sup>

Whether the autobiographical reference of that passage is small or great, it brings us closer to the question than would any anecdotes about, say, angry fathers or sobbing mothers.

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16. In La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, 27 Dec. 1949, p.1.

17. Montaigne-Preis 1972, Stiftung F. V. S. Hamburg, p.38.

18. Ibid., pp.37-8.

It is a passage, furthermore, that states the presence of light and hope in experiences that are also dark and frightening. If they had been only negative, they could not have constituted an awakening to poetry. Jaccottet's account of poetic experiences in La Promenade sous les arbres stresses the positive side: "Mon sentiment d'avoir vécu, certains jours, mieux, c'est-à-dire plus pleinement, plus intensément, plus réellement que d'autres", and says that he felt he was approaching the centre of reality.<sup>19</sup> And a later account speaks of a simultaneous sense of life and order, of "un ordre éternellement jaillissant" - with the caution that some essential aspects of this experience were "la fragilité et l'obscurité, le manque d'appuis, la solitude, une ombre d'effroi sur le bonheur".<sup>20</sup> It is a paradox that recalls Baudelaire's phrase, "l'horreur et l'extase de la vie". According to Jaccottet's speech of 1956, one element of the experience is a consciousness of death, the existential realisation that though one is alive, one could very easily be dead, and one will certainly die some day, without understanding how and why:

Le seul fait que nous soyons ici, les pieds, sur cet astre impliqué dans une incompréhensible horlogerie à explosions, nous autres, paquets mal ficelés dont on ne comprend pas comment le contenu ne s'est pas déjà cent fois échappé (...) ce seul fait devait en réalité largement suffire à nous remplir de stupeur pour le restant de nos jours.<sup>21</sup>

There may not seem to be much ecstasy in that; it is certainly awesome, overwhelming; and yet, after all, we are

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19. Prom, pp.14-15. Without this sense of plenitude, he would not have felt that A. E.'s youthful intuitions resembled his own.

20. El, p.143. This passage also uses the image of the centre (El, p.144).

21. In Domaine Suisse, loc. cit., pp.64-5.



alive. Somehow or other associated with the great sense of insecurity came a glimpse of fullness, a certain wonderment. It was only momentary, but "dans les moments où nous nous sentons de nouveau en contact avec une réalité qui, par la plénitude qu'elle nous insuffle, témoigne avec évidence qu'elle est plus pure que l'autre (...) ce n'est pas seulement la fascination de la mort, en dépit de tout, qui nous atteint".<sup>22</sup> Of this positive side of such inner experiences Jaccottet dated to write in the plural form "nous", denying that there was anything singular or abnormal about it. On the contrary "ce pressentiment d'une vie plus profonde et plus dense a été le lot de chacun de nous une fois ou l'autre (...) simplement d'autres soucis nous en ont détournés".<sup>23</sup> And yet at least one reference suggests that the special experiences occurring during Jaccottet's adolescence constituted a sort of poetic vocation:

Celui qui avait fait, ne fût-ce qu'une seule fois, l'expérience d'une vie plus profonde, celui qui avait senti, sous les décombres de la guerre, la persistance, bien que très lointaine, d'une réalité différente, même si cette réalité était souvent apparue dans le mystère de la mort, celui-là était pris au piège et ne pouvait plus cesser d'être à l'écoute de cette sorte d'appel .<sup>24</sup>

This positive voice is not very reassuring, indeed it is

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22. Ibid., p.67.

23. Ibid., p.68. Cf E1, p.144: "L'expérience, pour être mystérieuse, n'en est pas moins commune (fréquente au point que l'on oublie d'y penser)". Jaccottet offers no evidence; but a recent American study, "Are We a Nation of Mystics?" (A. Greeley and W. McCready in the New York Times Magazine), certainly supports his opinion: in a random survey of 1500 persons about 40% answered "yes" to the question "Have you ever had the feeling of being very close to a powerful spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself?".

24. Ibid., p.66.

itself suspect - "était-elle seulement la voix qui nous attire vers l'ombre, le funèbre oiseau qui ne laisserait de nous, si nous l'écoutions, que des ossements?"<sup>25</sup> In saying this Jaccottet echoes some words of the Swiss poet Edmond-Henri Crisinel:

"Ne me résiste pas", lui dit la Voix. Le jeune homme s'arrête, comme pétrifié. Dix doigts le serrent à la gorge, l'étouffent. Mais déjà consentant: "Si tu étais le Démon?..."<sup>26</sup>

Those sentences come from Crisinel's prose-work Alectone, which Jaccottet certainly read in 1944, and which had a discernible influence on his Trois poèmes aux démons, which is the chief literary product of the adolescent poet's inner life.

To Jaccottet, these experiences involved, indissolubly, both life and poetry: "la poésie et la vie m'ont toujours paru étroitement liées, à leur racine".<sup>27</sup> They were moments marked by a sort of rupture in life, "des espèces de trouées, de déchirures (...) qui font que les limites de cette existence, de ce monde, sont brisées"; and the writer's work proceeds "à partir d'une incertitude profonde, d'une sorte d'était obscur, confus, d'un manque, presque d'un égarement"<sup>28</sup> - that word "égarement" was one which Jaccottet used to characterize his condition in "Pour les Ombres".<sup>29</sup> His accounts of the experience do not place the existential

25. Ibid., p.66.

26. E.-H. Crisinel, Alectone, Porrentruy, Aux portes de France, 1944, p.43.

27. Montaigne-Preis 1972, p.39. Cf Prom, p.14: "J'avais eu envie d'écrire des poèmes, somme toute, à chaque fois que j'avais vraiment, selon mon sentiment, vécu".

28. Ibid., pp.38, 37.

29. In Cahiers de Poésie, loc. cit., p.51.

nature of it before, or above, its connection with poetry. He generalizes, indeed, that "la mesure de l'art nous est révélée en même temps que l'essentiel de toute vie nous apparaît sans mesure".<sup>30</sup> It is doubtless true that he would not have responded to Roud's speech unless it had corresponded to his own prior experiences; it is also true that Roud enabled him to recognize, and even to discover, what they were. As early as 1948 Jaccottet said that in Roud's books he had discovered "au moment de l'adolescence, l'écho le plus exact et le plus troublant de ce que sa métamorphose me faisait subir".<sup>31</sup> Twenty years later he prefaced a long quotation from Roud's Essai pour un paradis by speaking of:

le temps décisif de l'adolescence, quand se creuse soudain la distance entre le poète et les "autres", et qu'à la faveur de cette crise se produisent les rencontres, les découvertes qui orientent une existence (c'est comme si l'inconnu, l'essentiel - sous forme de ténèbres ou de lumière - fondait sur l'être en trait de foudre et le divisait jusqu'au fond - pour le détruire ou le féconder).<sup>32</sup>

For Jaccottet, Roud represented a "rencontre" of this kind, a revelation that literature could somehow help him come closer to reality. To his previous reading, notably of Ramuz, Jaccottet proceeded to add Roud, Crisinel and other Swiss authors; Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Claudel and Jouve; and before long Rilke, Dostoyevsky, T.S. Eliot and Homer. He was the adolescent discoverer of books, who "loin de penser que la poésie soit, comme on voudrait le lui faire croire, un masque, un trop beau masque sur le visage insoutenable du réel, a le sentiment qu'à sa manière, elle doit dire vrai, ou en tout

30. Montaigne-Preis 1972, p.38.

31. In Pour l'Art, cahier I, Lausanne, June-July 1948, p.8.

32. Gustave Roud, p.16.

cas, mentir moins que les dogmes, les doctrines".<sup>33</sup>

The above discussion of Jaccottet's experiences in the early 1940's shows that the Second World War need not be assigned a determining role in them. He said later that "alors (en 1941), je crois bien qu'elle ne nous était plus que le bruit d'un orage lointain", while conceding that "elle devait un peu plus tard me devenir très proche"<sup>34</sup> - an allusion to his one poem inspired by it, Requiem, begun in about 1944. The war was not, however, too far away to be sensed very strongly by the Swiss people, who had better information about it than some of their suffering neighbours. And it certainly did contribute to the sombre and serious outlook of the young Jaccottet. We have already seen that he viewed poetry as a confrontation with reality, not as a mask over reality. The historical reality made him all the less sympathetic to merely ornamental poetry. In one of his earliest reviews, he asks "Que faire, dans nos chambres chaque jour dévastées par l'inquiétude, de bibelots ou de bijoux, s'ils ne sont des diamants plus coupants que l'acier?"<sup>35</sup>

Now the Trois Poèmes aux démons published in 1945 make no mention of war - but a review of that year declares "Aujourd'hui les monstres de la catastrophe s'accouplent aux démons intérieurs".<sup>36</sup> That remark was prompted by Michaux's

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33. Montaigne-Preis 1972, p.39. Cf Prom, p.19: "La poésie des autres m'avait donné ce sentiment d'une plus grande réalité".

34. Gustave Roud, p.5.

35. In Formes et Couleurs, Lausanne, 1944, no. 6. This periodical is not paginated. In a 1946 issue, Jaccottet speaks of "cette guerre, atroce et lépreuse entre toutes" (Formes et Couleurs, 1946, no. 1.).

36. In Formes et Couleurs, 1946, no. 5.

Epreuves, Exorcismes, a work Jaccottet seems to echo in two lines of Requiem:

Je livrerai les innocents aux tigres, dit le maître,  
et leur enfoncerai mon rire sous les ongles.<sup>37</sup>

We may safely suppose, indeed, that the personal demons exorcized in the Trois Poèmes bore some relation to the historical monsters then being repressed - and yet the book's achevé d'imprimer marked "le 8 mai, jour de la victoire" remains less than appropriate.

Although war had an end and a beginning, Jaccottet did not see it as an isolated episode of misery. On the contrary, it seemed to him only the most recent and convincing evidence of a general disharmony - of that disorder in culture, that breakdown of values perceived by most twentieth-century poets and by some long before: Baudelaire, Nerval, Leopardi, Novalis, and Hölderlin.<sup>38</sup> Thus he is referring to the whole modern period, when he writes in 1946 of "la catastrophe qui a bouleversé le monde et le menace encore maintenant, cette incroyable irruption de démoniaque à tous les étages de l'humain" which he says "crée fatalement chez le poète un état de rupture profonde".<sup>39</sup> Jaccottet agreed essentially with Crisinel, whom he knew in those years, who "ne pouvait pas ne pas voir dans les événements des dix dernières années le déchaînement même de ce mal dont il connaissait depuis longtemps la puissance".<sup>40</sup> For Jaccottet the war represented a confirmation of his prior

37. Requiem, Lausanne, Mermod, 1947, p.21.

38. Cf. Jou, p.50 (May 1972): "Presque toutes les voix volontairement ou non prophétiques depuis cent ans parlent de fin".

39. In Formes et Couleurs, 1946, no. 3.

40. In La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, 27 Dec., 1949, p.3.

reasons for pessimism and anxiety. In retrospect he declared that it showed people how false their security was, that "la réalité n'était pas aussi raisonnable, aussi bien définie, aussi satisfaisante (...) quand il s'agissait de laisser entendre que nos refuges traditionnels étaient en ruines, que la présence de la mort était tout proche et fascinante, l'époque m'aidait..."<sup>41</sup> More recently he admitted:

Les événements effrayants de l'histoire contemporaine n'étaient pas faits, certes, pour me rendre la confiance. On aurait même dit que leur violence, leur bassesse, en ruinant tant d'ouvrages et tant de vies, ruinaient plus définitivement encore toute formule prétendant expliquer le monde....<sup>42</sup>

The simplistic optimism some people displayed after the war could not by any means persuade Jaccottet that harmony had returned.

After Requiem, Jaccottet has not written about the bloodshed of the 1940's - although he must have received repeated reminders of it while living at Grignan, twenty-five kilometres from Dieulefit where Pierre Emmanuel wrote his hymns and only nine kilometres from the scene of the Valréas massacre of June 1944. There is, however, a clear allusion in the opening poem of L'Ignorant:

Une prière dans l'ébranlement des villes,  
dans la fin de la guerre, dans l'afflux des morts...  
(P/I, p.51)

The war certainly helped to confirm his sombre view of twentieth-century civilisation and of the human condition in general.

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41. In Domaine Suisse, loc. cit. pp.65-66.

42. Montaigne-Preis 1972, p.42. Cf El, p.128: "Les grands mots qui étaient censés nous servir de guides pour un véritable progrès ont fini par s'étendre au point de couvrir toutes les ignominies, et nous ne pouvons plus que nous en détourner".

Discussing Jaccottet's work in 1973, Jean Lestavel wrote:

il doit indéniablement beaucoup de ses orientations à un compatriote d'une génération antérieure, Gustave Roud (....) Même gravité, même réserve et patience nourries d'un contact avec le monde paysan, même fidélité absolue à la seule expérience intérieure; même méfiance du savoir et de l'abstraction, mêmes admirations littéraires.<sup>43</sup>

It is appropriate to expand on what has already been said about Gustave Roud, because he is the least-known of the important influences on Jaccottet - indeed he would scarcely be heard of outside Switzerland but for Jaccottet's deeply sympathetic essay of 1968.<sup>44</sup> When Roud died recently in his eightieth year (1977, in Moudon), Jaccottet agreed to re-edit his works.

In view of the impact on Jaccottet of Roud's 1941 speech,<sup>45</sup> the chief domain to explore must be the personal experiences that are central to Roud's writings. One face of them is designated by the title of his first book, Adieu (1927), which denotes the poet's separation from people and things, his solitude and sense of future death, a separation at the origin of his poetic vocation, as he stated in 1945:

Il fallait cette privation première, cette rupture,  
ce noir malaise où s'éternise la naissance d'un  
témoin...<sup>46</sup>

The other face of these experiences is a brief and ecstatic communion with nature:

O le soleil d'août sur les moissons anciennes quand  
la vallée tout entière chancelle dans les vagues de

43. In La Vie spirituelle, July-Aug. 1973, pp.574-5.

44. Gustave Roud, (1968), and the article in L'Entretien des Muses, pp.95-101.

45. Gustave Roud, pp.5-6 and also in Domaine Suisse, Oct.-Nov. 1956, p.63.

46. Roud, Air de la solitude, in Gustave Roud, p.258.

chaleur transparente et la profonde poitrine nue  
baigne au fleuve de l'azur sans fond! Qu'il faisait  
chaud parmi les seigles plus hauts que nos visages!<sup>47</sup>

In two texts of 1941, one of which Jaccottet memorized, Roud evokes similar rapturous experiences of a sunlit pastoral scene:<sup>48</sup>

Repose, laboureur las, règne et rayonne sous le soleil  
suspendu, maître du monde! Tu as pris au piège de ton  
corps l'ange immense de l'espace. Ecoute jusqu'au fond  
du ciel frémir ce battement de plumes heureuses! Le  
Temps lui-même à tes genoux couché lèche avec lenteur,  
comme un chien, ta grande main fauve éternelle.

A few pages later Roud says that beside this "repos vivant dans la plénitude atteinte" the repose of death is a mere grimace. From such experiences of plenitude he derived his view of nature as a potentially active presence:

J'ai toujours souri de l'impassible théâtre: non, la  
nature sent nos adorations, elle appelle, elle désire  
elle aussi l'échange.<sup>49</sup>

He took one of his mottoes from Novalis: "Le Paradis est dispersé sur toute la terre, c'est pourquoi on ne le reconnaît plus. Il faut réunir ses traits épars".<sup>50</sup>

In Roud's view, it follows that the role of poetry must be to interrogate nature in order to receive its messages:

La poésie (la vraie) m'a toujours paru être (...) une  
quête de signes menée au coeur d'un monde qui ne  
demande qu'à répondre, interrogé, il est vrai, selon  
telle ou telle inflexion de voix.<sup>51</sup>

This is very similar to the view that Jaccottet in his

47. Roud, Adieu, in Gustave Roud, p.110.

48. Roud, Ecrits II pp.32-3. Cf pp.18ff, the text "Epaule" which Jaccottet refers to in Jou, p.12 (Sept. 1969).

49. Ibid., p.109.

50. Quoted in Gustave Roud, p.40. Jaccottet uses it on his own account in Prom, p.28. The original reads: "Das Paradies ist gleichsam über die ganze Erde verstreut - und daher so unkenntlich geworden - Seine zerstreuten Züge sollen vereinigt - sein Skelett soll ausgefüllt werden".

51. Roud, Ecrits II, p.39.



maturity continued to hold, as will be seen in later chapters.

All the texts of Roud quoted so far date from before or during the time when Jaccottet first knew him, that is the last years of the war. Later on Roud was to write even more explicitly about his early experiences, in texts scarcely less relevant to his influence on Jaccottet, since it was a continuing influence from a very consistent writer. This nostalgic text appeared in 1958:

La Vérité ne pourra jamais nous atteindre. Elle nous cerne de son jeu d'échos et de reflets insaisissables, elle nous effleure soudain comme l'aile de vent frais l'épaule des faucheurs, et fuit... Et nul parmi ceux que brûle la soif de l'innocence n'en découvrira jamais la source. Seul un miroitement parfois la dénonce à travers les broussailles du réel, comme il arrive aux rivières endormies, mais cette lueur est plus précieuse à notre coeur que son propre sang. Qui l'a surprise un jour, apparue, disparue, au plus profond d'un regard humain n'aura désormais d'autre poursuite.<sup>52</sup>

And this text, the clearest of all, was not published until 1967:

au centre de ma vie, il y a cette faille, cette transparence, ce suspens indicible sur quoi se fixent, fascinés, mon regard et ma pensée. Un jour, je fus admis vivant à l'éternel.

(...)L'éternel n'est pas une Terre promise à la pointe extrême d'un chemin de sueurs et de larmes, et nul n'en pourrait forcer l'accès par quelque intrusion frauduleuse, puisque nous sommes en lui. La connaissance qu'une grâce nous en accorde est brutale comme un rapt(...)

Oui, j'ai été cet homme traversé (...) j'ai soutenu de tout mon corps l'irruption de l'éternel, j'ai subi l'assaut de l'ineffable, j'ai vu la vraie lumière, la même, baigner toutes ces choses périssables autour de moi, leur infuser une splendeur de symphonie...<sup>53</sup>

Such were the preoccupations of the writer whom Jaccottet heard, read, and met during the war, and to whom

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52. Roud, Le Repos du cavalier, in Gustave Roud, p.175.

53. Roud, Pour un Requiem, in Gustave Roud, p.181.

he dedicated his Requiem (1947). What was it that gave him such a sense of recognition? Not the landscape of Roud's work, familiar though it was - Jaccottet's early writings show no real closeness to Roud's peasant reality, though doubtless the later poet of Grignan became more sensitive to this aspect of Roud's work. What must have moved Jaccottet most was the expression of inner experience. We have mentioned the importance of darkness and danger, the insecurity of his first poems. The example of Roud showed that threat and separation can be profitable, that solitude can be even desirable, when this solitude "par la faille qu'elle creuse dans le coeur, illumine soudain le monde d'une lumière qu'on n'oubliera jamais". How much this glimpse of light, of plenitude, of truth, meant to the young poet is shown by his remark that in a world "que l'adolescent devine truqué ou amputé" the home of Roud was "une sorte d'île où plus de vérité est maintenue".<sup>54</sup>

In view of this, it is easy to understand why Jaccottet's evaluation of Roud lacks objectivity and moderation.<sup>55</sup> But really Jaccottet esteems Roud not as a great poet but as a mentor and as a living presence:

Roud était là, tout proche, effacé mais accessible (...) il représentait à nos yeux le poète "à l'état pur" - hors de toute actualité, presque hors de la vie -, immobilisé en quelque centre dérobé, en un autre Delphes (...) exclusivement attentif à ce qui, d'un autre monde, affleure dans le nôtre...<sup>56</sup>

In addition, Roud was one of those most responsible for introducing to Jaccottet the much greater poets of the past

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54. Gustave Roud, p.47 and p.10.

55. René Lacôte criticized it on these grounds in Lettres françaises, 7 Jan. 1970, p.8.

56. Gustave Roud, p.12.

who were to influence him more profoundly: Rilke and Hölderlin.<sup>57</sup> They will be discussed presently, at the end of chapter three.

Mention has been made in passing of Jaccottet's earliest writings - these must now be examined more closely. He first had poems published in 1942-43, according to Clerval,<sup>58</sup> but these were probably a small fraction of those he was then writing. The long poem "Pour les Ombres" appeared in Cahiers de Poésie in 1944; in 1945 his first book came out, the Trois poèmes aux démons; and this was followed, still in Switzerland, by Requiem (1947), a poem in three sections written before he left for Paris. These student works are too diverse to constitute a distinctive "Lausanne period", and their quality is uneven. But although the author does not now count them in the canon of his works, they are of interest in revealing some of his first impulses as a writer, and as antecedents to the real achievement of L'Effraie et autres poésies (1953). We can find in them obvious experimentation with form and style, ambitious choice of thematic

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57. Roud's translations of Poèmes de Hölderlin and of Rilke's Lettres à un jeune poète appeared in 1942 and 1945 respectively, both published by Mermoud, Lausanne - as were his selections from Novalis (1948).

58. Clerval, p.9. A curious fact is that Jaccottet wrote at least one play. Formes et Couleurs, 1945, no.2 (which published a fragment of Requiem, two poem-translations from the German, and also a photo of Jaccottet - looking serious and fragile, even without wrinkles) mentions Perceval and La Lèpre (en préparation). One play, presumably Perceval, was read in 1945 at the Lausanne "Guilde du Livre", according to La Suisse contemporaine, 9 Sept. 1945, p.887.

material, perhaps even some true poetry - certainly talent and promise. But ultimately we must dismiss them in the way Jaccottet himself dismisses Rilke's early work:

Aucun texte, dans l'abondante production de René Rilke, n'a de réelle valeur, ni ne nous apprend grand-chose sur lui. Y sont sensibles néanmoins une grande facilité d'expression, un sens inné de la mélodie; la hantise de la mort; le goût de l'assourdi, du fané, du recueilli, du subtil. Mais ce sont là des traits communs à nombre de jeunes poètes modernes. (...) comme le besoin très vif à cette époque d'être publié, conseillé, encouragé.<sup>59</sup>

"Pour les Ombres" is written in rhymed alexandrins, grouped mostly in quatrains after some unconvincing terza rima at the start. This alexandrin has not the subtle irregularities found later in L'Effraie and L'Ignorant; it has if anything too much of what people call "musicality" (as if all music were marked largo e dolce, sempre legato). In Switzerland, as in France, the alexandrin was then in vogue. The Swiss master of "le beau langage valéryen", Pierre-Louis Matthey, published in 1941 his Alcyonée à Pallène, a lofty exclamatory poem which certainly made an impression on the young Jaccottet. Thirty years later he declared "aucun poète de notre pays n'est aussi riche en beautés", while admitting he has lost enthusiasm for Matthey's closed preciosity, his "vers volontairement surchargé d'expressivité visuelle ou sonore".<sup>60</sup> "Pour les Ombres" is more reminiscent of Matthey than of Roud (or of Baudelaire), and it is unoriginal in style. It certainly warrants Jaccottet's

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59. Rilke par lui-même, p.21.

60. In Etudes de Lettres, Lausanne April-Sept.1972, pp.19, 22. Jaccottet's earliest comment on Matthey, a review in Formes et Couleurs, 1945, 5, applauds "une verdure, un éclat d'images, une musique rigoureuse et profondément originale qui sont d'un grand poète".

retrospective remark that "à l'âge où l'on écrivait encore à l'insu de tous (...) ce que l'on croyait crier sur la page était le plus 'littéraire', au mauvais sens du mot".<sup>61</sup>

"Pour les Ombres" and Trois poèmes aux démons have a common inspiration: both are filled with a sense of menace, and regret the loss of naïve happiness. The latter work is the less conventional and the more surprising: indeed were its author unknown, nobody would think to attribute it to Jaccottet. It prompts the reflection that readers can easily be deceived by the orderliness of L'Effraie, in ignorance of the disorder that preceded it. These three texts are entirely in prose, and the designation "poems" rather begs the question, though their style seldom descends to merely prosaic description and narration. They show debts to modern prose-poets, including the Rimbaud of Une Saison en Enfer; and they betray the particular influence of Crisinel's Alectone, published in 1944 in the same series. Of his early enthusiasm for Rimbaud, Jaccottet has said: "J'avais pu croire, parfois, que la fascination que cette oeuvre unique avait exercée sur moi, comme sur tant d'autres, correspondait plus particulièrement à un certain moment de la vie où la difficulté de passer de l'enfance à l'âge d'homme s'y trouvait exprimée".<sup>62</sup> Of Alectone, he later wrote: "Pour triompher plus surement de ses démons, ou pour goûter une fois de plus à leur tremblante présence, ou encore pour l'un et l'autre, Crisinel s'efforça de mieux cerner le

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61. In Bulletin de la Fondation C. F. Ramuz, 1971, p.20. Cf NRF, March 1976, p.65: "J'avais commencé, très jeune, comme tout le monde, par écrire des poèmes qui n'étaient qu'un pâle décalque d'oeuvres qui me frappaient, sans ombre de singularité".

62. In La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, 15 Aug. 1951, p.1.

détail de son expérience".<sup>63</sup> In 1945 a critic could declare that "E-H. Crisinel et Philippe Jaccottet explorent des enfers rimbaldiens et se livrent aux délices de l'hallucination concertée"<sup>64</sup> - words that could not possibly touch the servant of light who wrote Airs, yet are true of this early Jaccottet living the anxieties of the adolescent's transition to manhood at an anguished moment of history. The title seems to refer to the idea Jaccottet then had that poets cannot help being, first of all, "du parti des démons".<sup>65</sup>

Considering the youth of the author, "Pour les Ombres" is quite an impressive work, and Trois poèmes aux démons even more so (though neither of them makes one forget his youth). They did on their appearance impress the Swiss literati whom Jaccottet was then meeting, and who perhaps moderated their criticisms because of his sensitivity. Thirty years later, they can still impress: Jacques Chessex writes: "J'ouvre ces Trois poèmes aux démons où s'exprime, jaillissant, torturé, hagard, son jeune génie. Cris, protestations, appels, une véhémence sombre, un romantisme hanté, qui tord le chant..."<sup>66</sup> It is easy to see what strength of earnestness enabled them to find a publisher, and what embarrassing excesses made the author later renounce them. (His Requiem was already free of Crisinel's influence, and soon he was declaring: "Il faut en finir avec un certain Rimbaud".<sup>67</sup>)

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63. L'Entretien des Muses, p.86.

64. P.O. Walzer in Formes et Couleurs, 1945, 2.

65. In Formes et Couleurs, 1946, 1. He takes the phrase from Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

66. In 24 Heures, Lausanne, 2-3 Aug. 1975.

67. In Pour l'art, 1950, III, 10, p.15.

The most excessive of the Trois poèmes aux démons is "La Ville", for its expression of adolescent revolt:

Car nous méprisons vraiment ceux que le sommeil  
couvre avec douceur comme la neige de Noël et dont  
les mains restent couchées le long de leur berceau,  
pareilles aux poupées que prennent dans leur berceau  
les petites filles secrètes, misérables bêtes  
apprivoisées tandis que des fauves chassent dans  
les forêts perdues! (...) Le lac commençait à  
gronder jusqu'au centre de la ville, on entendait  
les vagues battre les marches de banques. (pp. 22-23).

Some elements of the scene associate it with Lausanne; but really it belongs in "un climat de rêve éveillé" that recalls the German Romantics or the French surrealists.<sup>68</sup>

All three poems contain scenes of violence - typically clawing with the fingernails to draw blood - which are so gratuitous that their telling seems to be more a therapeutic exercise than a creative one. And yet there are passages of considerable power, like this parenthesis:

Et moi, j'aurais voulu tout quitter pour les routes  
vides qui mènent aux demeures sans nom, mais j'avais  
beau chercher les carrefours d'autrefois, les  
enseignes d'autrefois, j'étais captif! (p.18)

But even that sentence is derivative in expression: it calls to mind the writings of Gustave Roud, or those of the Rimbaud Jaccottet has continued to esteem, the Rimbaud nostalgic for his past glimpses of truth and purity.

The passage in Trois poèmes aux démons that most announces Jaccottet's later work is in "Agitato", a sort of

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68. G. Nicole in La Suisse contemporaine, Sept. 1945, p.886. The article that best situates Jaccottet in relation to Surrealism is "A propos du surréalisme" in La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, 15 Oct. 1952, pp.1-2, where he is not unsympathetic to its "recherche proprement métaphysique". However he criticizes the language of the Surrealists' works, which had "souvent une allure plus 'littéraire' encore que les oeuvres de ceux qu'ils vomissaient". This paradox of anti-literary intentions producing more verbalism had been developed by Paulhan in Les Fleurs de Tarbes and Clef de la Poésie (1941 and 1944). It remained in 1966 Jaccottet's main objection to Surrealism (Sem, p.108).

overture to the three movements, where he writes, in what is already a typically confidential tone:

Tu te recules, mais tu regardes encore; nous le savons, il faut consentir aux monstres, il faut affronter les démons. Tant pis si tu y perds la joie, mais être lâche, mais fermer les yeux sur une seule bête du mal, un seul coeur malgré tout vivant, il ne faut pas. (p.10)

The temptation and the refusal of moral cowardice, and the associated motif of "les yeux ouverts", have not ceased to be part of Jaccottet's preoccupations. From the very beginning, he has had no interest in the literature of escapism or entertainment.

The long poem Requiem (1947) marks a great advance; it has above all a sureness of tone that brings it some way to fulfilling its objectives. The poet is here developing his individual voice. To the Jaccottet of thirty years later it was still "plus un livre de moi" than the preceding one - mostly by virtue of its theme: "une méditation entre la vie et la mort". He was, when he wrote it, a student "passionné de Rilke, je Jouve, d'Eliot", ambitious to create a great work, "d'écrire les Elégies de Duino avant le reste", as he remarked ironically.<sup>69</sup> In view of these pretensions, its failure is not surprising; but in it, the young Jaccottet wrote passages of great beauty. Requiem is an exercise in the loftiest kind of modern poetry.

Far from expressing mere personal obsessions, this work takes as its subject the young men - of Jaccottet's own

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69. Personal communication. One recent critic is less severe: to Jacques Réda, Requiem remains "parmi ses plus beaux poèmes sans doute" (Cahiers du Chemin, 15 Oct. 1970, p.113).



generation - killed in 1944 and 1945: it was prompted by some photos of hostages executed after being tortured:

Enfants écorchés vifs!  
Ecorchés,  
C'est-à-dire la peau des joues livrée aux ongles sales,  
tirée, puis arrachée,  
et lacérées les lèvres embrasseuses,  
à coup de griffes,  
et quelles piqûres d'aiguilles au creux des paumes,  
perçant les mains,  
gonflant les mains,  
et dans la bouche où les oranges fondaient  
ces couteaux enfoncés,  
plantés dans les gencives,  
au moins pitié pour les yeux qui regardent! (pp.21-22)

Clerval speaks of the impact of "les excès de l'épuration",<sup>70</sup> but they cannot have counted as much as Nazi crimes. Requiem is not, in any case, a "poème de circonstance" - Jaccottet's wish resembled that of Jouve in La Vierge de Paris: "faire un livre qui ne fût pas lié seulement au fait historique, et portât plus haut".<sup>71</sup> Jaccottet's inner involvement in history is particularly well attested in this expression of shame: "Je voudrais leur cacher ma trop visible vie" (p.21); and his attempt to universalize can be seen in these lines:

...nous sommes tous les mères de ces morts.  
Tu es leur mère, et moi leur mère, ensemble  
et séparés sous la nuit qui est là maintenant,  
haute et frileuse. (p.30)

In form, the work is sectional, comprising "Dies Irae", "Requiem" (five parts), and then "Gloria". Each of these sections is divided into paragraphs of very uneven length; and the verse is free, and mostly unrhymed, with frequent alexandrins. It is clearly not a form taken from the "Missa pro defunctis", since there the Requiem is an introit, the Dies Irae occurs only after the Agnus Dei, and the Gloria of

70. Clerval, p.10, presumably referring to atrocities committed after the liberation.

71. Quoted in R. Miçha, Pierre Jean Jouve, 1956, p.57.

the Ordinary Mass is completely omitted. If anything, Jaccottet's form recalls Eliot's Four Quartets, particularly when he introduces a lyrical section on pages 26-27; and the abruptness of the transitions is like the Duineser Elegien, which Jaccottet likens to fantasias.<sup>72</sup>

The poem is a meditation on the meaning of death and the preciousness of life:

On dirait qu'ils ont mal encore, que la souffrance  
est le seul bien qu'ils puissent emporter de la terre,  
leur dernier bien peut-être, ô mère agenouillée,  
jadis avare de cet or qui n'a plus cours,  
leur jeune vie... (p.24)

Speaking as a sort of disembodied witness, the poet attempts to understand the pain of the tortured, and to recreate the grief of their mothers and fiancées. Above all, he tries to imagine the fate of the dead:

O qui sont-ils, ceux-là,  
s'ils ne boiront plus l'eau dans leurs paumes,  
s'ils ne mangeront plus du miel! (p.25)

In places he addresses them in the second person: "Ils vous ont jetés / à la vieille nuit tigre" (p.16). This is most surprising and effective just at the point where he denies that they can hear:

Ici, rappelez-vous encore, il y a un jour  
où, sous la neige des talus, une gerbe jeune...  
La neige ne tient jamais plus de trois mois. Alors,  
il y a de grandes fêtes...  
Mais vous, l'hiver est-il vraiment à vos poignets  
ce lièvre de ténèbres et vivace, la mort? (pp. 25-26)

The incredulity implied by "vraiment" is typical, and so is the insistence on the happiness of life on earth: the dead have been "volés à la lumière", distanced from the world we know.

Is there another world? The possibility is raised:

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72. Rilke par lui-même, p.151.

Peut-être ils sont ailleurs,  
 en des pays d'eaux blanches éclatantes...  
 Déjà repris au jeu,  
 tranquilles, apaisés, transparents... (p.26)

Or perhaps the dead survive in another form, as torches, or crystal, or diamond. But that is no reason for hope:

Mais rien ne suffira:  
 vie éternelle n'est pas vie,  
 vie est mourante,  
 feuille fragile de laurier,  
 sourire,  
 couronne d'écume...

Eternel est cristal. (pp.28-29)

This is the densest section of the work. It can be interpreted to mean that the essence of living lies in the perception, by mortal senses, of transient things - "les feux de l'automne", "le coq de midi" - things absent from the world of death or eternity.<sup>73</sup>

Such is the poem's dominant theme, which combines with the tone of gravity and uncertainty to give it an overall coherence. Various recurrences and cross-references of words and images like "la pivoine", "la rose", "les mains" and especially "la lumière" are valuable also. But the sudden jumps from scene to sketchy scene threaten both the coherence and the sense of reality. It is difficult to agree with the reviewer who spoke of "l'authenticité de cette poésie où les mots d'emblée cèdent le pas aux choses (...) et acquièrent une résistance 'physique'. D'où leur singulier pouvoir d'évocation".<sup>74</sup> Requiem is perhaps the least readable of Jaccottet's works: the shifting pronouns can be puzzling

73. Ten years later Jaccottet wrote that terms like "cristal" and "rubis" make him uneasy: "Ils ne rendent en tout cas nullement compte de ce que j'aime dans les rivières et dans les feux, ils détachent ceux-ci de ma vie pour les figer dans un monde artificiel où la durée évoque plutôt la mort à laquelle justement l'on pensait échapper que ce qui a été appelé, dans une surprenante antithèse, la vie éternelle". (Prom, p.91)

74. J. Simon in Formes et Couleurs, 1948, 3. Emphasis added.

(though the same is said of Rilke), and the word-order is at times forced: "Que s'ouvre (il n'y aura plus de nuits pour nous) la rose!" (p.36)

That Requiem contains some exquisite lines, however, is indisputable. Most of these rely on images of nature, rendered more poignant by the theme of mortality:

Les fontaines tintent aux versants les plus hauts des  
montagnes;  
il y a de grands arbres d'étoiles,  
et les bergers se lèvent pour la bénédiction de l'espace.  
qu'ils se reposent dans la paix,  
au fil des tristes vals nocturnes  
ouvert en éventail comme les lignes de la main. (p.31)

Jaccottet already shows a predilection for nature images that are fragile and ephemeral, and for the exceptional light-effects between day and night:

Puis c'est le soir, lent chat de cendre sur l'ardoise;  
et descendirent les annonces de l'ombre...

Vergers tremblants, ruchers d'une obscure lumière:  
c'est l'heure où s'abandonne à la limpidité  
la terre transparente... (p.19)

That certainly announces his later work, and so do the lines where subtle regular verse expresses sensitive feeling:

Peut-être que de toi je croirais qu'ils reposent,  
je comprendrais qu'un jour sans nuit puisse être  
beau.... (p.36)

Unfortunately the very beauty of the verse becomes a weakness: instead of confronting and calming the horror of death, it simply screens it. Jaccottet may have aspired to repeat Rilke's poetic transformation of the world, of the achievement of Jammes' Elégies:

...à la terre blessée et toujours se perdant, il a  
su comme tout grand poète donner un visage plus beau  
que l'apparence, un peu moins fugitif; et peut-être  
(...) que même, qui surtout si cela est vain, il n'y  
a guère de plus humaine grandeur.<sup>75</sup>

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75. Jaccottet in his preface to Jammes' Elégies et autres vers, 1946, p.14.

Unfortunately, however, "plus beau" can easily be "trop beau" and "trop faux", particularly when Jaccottet's "Dies Irae" contains such a banal line as:

Dites qu'il faut plier les chaises avant la pluie!  
(p.15)

Obviously a requiem must hope to give repose - but it cannot succeed if it declares too loudly that "Tout est bien".<sup>76</sup>

Jaccottet's "Gloria" does not balance his evocation of suffering and loss. But can a balance ever be achieved? The fact that Requiem raises such questions is an indication of its close relationship to his subsequent works.

Above all, the failure of Requiem must be attributed to immaturity: only an exceptional writer could treat such a subject - atrocities with which he had no real contact - without falling into an over-literary style. It is no surprise that the work sometimes recalls the poems on similar subjects of Jouve and Emmanuel, then in vogue.<sup>77</sup> Jouve's influence is perhaps present in Jaccottet's most dislocated and ambiguous sentence: "Je sourdement / surnage, sombre..." (p.20). There may be a trace of T.S. Eliot also, although the concern of the Four Quartets for the "still point of the turning world" and the "moments of illumination" is close to concerns Jaccottet had already found in Roud's work. We can find, at least, some affinity between these lines from Burnt Norton:

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight .....

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76. Requiem, p.31, where the phrase is admittedly less assertive than in an earlier poem, "Elégie" (La Suisse contemporaine Aug. 1944? p.685).

77. Jaccottet had known their work for several years, according to L'Entretien des Muses, p.45 and Gustave Roud, p.11. In Formes et Couleurs, 1945, 2, he criticizes "la rhétorique faussement mystique" of Jouve.

Even while the dust moves  
 There rises the hidden laughter  
 Of children in the foliage  
 Quick now, here, now, always...

and these signs listed by Jaccottet:

Ou si peut-être ils se souviennent...  
 (Rien que les choses sur la table, ou les visages,  
 la porte du jardin...Un rire suffirait,  
 et nous serions vivants pour toujours...) (p.28)

The strongest influence on Requiem, however, is Rilke, whose presence in Jaccottet's thought and style is here far too dominant to be wholly beneficial. We know that the young poet considered Rilke the very touchstone of greatness: the Duineser Elegien display, he declared, "une unité profonde entre le moi et le monde qui me paraît être en fin de compte, mystère en pleine lumière, ce qui donne à la poésie sa plus profonde, sa plus définitive richesse".<sup>78</sup> Jaccottet had not yet learnt to admire without imitating. He echoes chiefly Rilke's first elegy, with its mood of lament at the transience of earthly things, and its concluding reflection about the "jungen Toten":

Freilich ist es seltsam, die Erde nicht mehr zu  
 bewohnen,  
 Kaum erlernte Gebräuche nicht mehr zu üben,  
 Rosen, und andern eigens versprechenden Dingen  
 nicht die Bedeutung menschlicher Zukunft zu geben...

That bears some resemblance to Jaccottet's lines:

O jeunes morts!  
 Pourrons-nous encore chanter gloire sur ces bûchers  
 avec ce coeur de cendre,  
 ce coeur où la mémoire dormait comme une perle,  
 et l'ange du monde s'était pris à ses reflets...

(O nacre de la terre!  
 Là-bas les roses seront fanées, et les saisons

Il n'y aura plus de jours.) (p.27)

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78. In Formes et Couleurs, 1946, 2. He mentions Rilke also in Formes et Couleurs 1944, 4; 1945, 5; and 1946, 1.

- lines indebted also to the opening of the tenth elegy:

Dass ich dereinst, an dem Ausgang der grimmigen  
Einsicht  
Jubel und Ruhm aufsinge zustimmenden Engeln...

It is presumably because of Rilke and not the Bible that Jaccottet refers to puzzling numinous presences as "anges". A further verbal echo is found near the end: "ceux-là (les jeunes morts) n'ont plus besoin qu'on les veille" (p.31), which comes from Rilke's line: "Schliesslich brauchen sie uns nicht mehr".

In Rilke's tenth elegy, where these "jungen Toten" reappear, there is a mysterious reconciliation of lament and praise that carries us into the realm of the ineffable. Jaccottet attains something of the same gravity, but not the authority and the magic of Rilke. Yet his whole enterprise can be seen to proceed from the Rilkean idea of drawing profit from sorrow, of finding in death something that may enhance the existence of living. Rilke believed that certain insights are possible only to those poets who confront the mysteries of death:

Nur wer die Leier schon hob  
auch unter Schatten,  
darf das unendliche Lob  
ahnend erstatten.

Nur wer mit Toten vom Mohn  
ass, von dem ihren,  
wird nicht den leisesten Ton  
wieder verlieren.<sup>79</sup>

Such an ambition is common to Jaccottet's Requiem of 1945-46, his "Livre des morts" of 1956, and his Leçons of 1967.

We can gain further insight into this early Jaccottet

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79. Rilke, Sonette au Orpheus, I, ix.

from his critical activity: two published prefaces and numerous reviews in the Lausanne periodical Formes et Couleurs. These "notes de lecture" comment on literally dozens of books, chiefly poetry, and show the breadth and voracity of his reading in past and present literature. They are the reaction - sometimes the hasty and extreme judgements - of a lively mind; and for us they show Jaccottet's developing reflections about poetry, reflections that are in advance of his creative writings of the time.

Thus in 1945 he says that Manoll's verse falls short of the "très sévères exigences" of poetry, and that "trop de poètes aujourd'hui plus que jamais, balbutient sans nécessité".<sup>80</sup> Yet the Trois Poèmes aux démons, despite their attempts at structure, are far from being models of rigour and necessity. In the following issue he says that Aragon's Diane française has only facile charms, that Eluard's Poésie ininterrompue is menaced by excess; and he commends Maurice Chappaz in these terms: "La pauvreté voulue de ce langage, son dépouillement, vaut bien toutes les opulences". Now his own Requiem has a measure of opulence and "dépouillement", but it was only after leaving Lausanne that he exhibited any real "pauvreté" in his style.

The following year he declared "je n'aime pas beaucoup l'éloquence", and claimed that poetry "n'a que faire de culture" but should be "d'abord terrestre et charnelle",<sup>81</sup> although his Requiem is at times eloquent, cultured, and nebulous. He was, in fact, learning to admire qualities that were not yet his own. Thus he remarks, of some translations

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80. Double issue of Formes et Couleurs numbered 3-4, 1945.

81. In Formes et Couleurs, 1946, 1.



from Emily Dickinson: "Cela n'est pas dit: tout est murmuré au bord du silence (...) nous voilà défaits de toute emphase! Et quelle précision dans l'elliptique! Tout est si simple que tout redevient mystère". Or, reviewing Supervielle's 1939-1945, Poèmes, he notes: "Supervielle ne dit rien qu'à mi-voix, comme s'il avait peur de faire mal, ou de mal faire (...) Choses incertaines, choses devenantes, que trahirait une voix trop sûre; que fait vivre au contraire dans leur tremblante présence un langage adroitement gauche, libre, comme hésitant".<sup>82</sup> Those phrases characterize a style that will become Jaccottet's own in L'Effraie.

One of the more profound remarks in these 1946 reviews is where Jaccottet finds (in poems of Cassou), "le miracle de l'équilibre entre la passion et l'expression, qui me paraît la condition de toute grande poésie".<sup>83</sup> But on the whole the negative comments tell us more than the positive ones: from Jaccottet's objections to various minor poets we can assemble a list of what he considers "enemies of true poetry" - sentiment, intellect, idealism, inexactitude, academicism, anarchism, didacticism, and lack of discernment in selection. The choice he himself made of Francis Jammes' poetry at this time<sup>84</sup> certainly tries to be discerning. In it Jaccottet concentrates on the Elégies and rejects completely the Georgiques chrétiennes, on the grounds (stated in his preface) that Jammes there used religion as a sort of refuge. This implies a requirement of lucidity and truthfulness which he himself will try to obey. What he finds most true in

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82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.

84. Jammes, Elégies et autres vers, Mermod, Lausanne, 1946.

"cette étrange poésie, si fraîche, si terrienne"<sup>85</sup> is "l'amour de la terre et l'angoisse de la voir si fragile, si tendrement offerte à la mort", and "la tendresse nerveuse, inquiète (...) que le poète voue aux choses de la terre, aux plus humbles qu'il transfigure" - and one agent of this transfiguration is "la simplicité du langage".<sup>86</sup>

One of Jaccottet's enduring conclusions drawn from this early reviewing is that a poet requires rigour. A note about Tzara ascribes that freedom of modern poetics to "un état de rupture profonde", but declares: "Cette liberté me semble exiger désormais, instamment, d'être ordonnée et limitée".<sup>87</sup> Those comments imply a partial rejection of the Trois Poèmes aux démons, and provide an emphasis that will soon be very strong.

It cannot be claimed that these ideas were particularly original or independent, although Jaccottet's praise for Ponge and Michaux, who had then only started to attract attention, shows him more open to novelty than he has subsequently become. But the reviews certainly show that he did a lot of thinking and feeling about the many poets he read, and thus laid the foundations for a future harmonization of theory and practice. The most penetrating of them prove that Jaccottet's schooling in Lausanne equipped him with more than a licence de lettres : he had acquired an unusual ability to read attentively and to respond sensitively. This quality of concentration would enable him to become a good literary critic and translator - and he later learnt to apply it to his

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85. Ibid., preface p.14.

86. Ibid., preface p.9.

87. In Formes et Couleurs, 1946, 3.

scrutiny of natural landscapes.

While the reviews concerned modern literature, almost exclusively, Jaccottet was at the same time discovering the writings of the distant past. His studies in Classics were particularly notable in giving him "la révélation du miracle grec".<sup>88</sup> Some idea of the enthusiastic teaching he received in Lausanne can be gained from Professor André Bonnard's La Civilisation grecque,<sup>89</sup> a two-volume survey which really does tell the general reader why Homer is still relevant today. In Jaccottet's later writing, Greek literature is arguably a stronger underlying influence than the Bible. Before long he was translating the Symposium and the Odyssey.<sup>90</sup> And something of Bonnard's imprint remains as late as Paysages avec figures absentes:

nous vivons ici sous le même ciel, à peu près, que  
Sapho (...) nos campagnes ne sont pas tellement  
différentes (...) je reste d'abord attiré par cette  
aire où les Grecs ont rayonné.<sup>91</sup>

In a more general way these literary studies made Jaccottet respectful of tradition, aware of its depth and diversity, and thus unmoved by the "neophilia" of the twentieth century. To the iconoclasts he asserts that "il est plus intelligent et plus fécond de relire et de retraduire Dante ou Gongora (...) que de mettre des des/moustaches à la Joconde";<sup>92</sup> and to the critics who attach special value to

88. According to Clerval, p.8.

89. Lausanne, La Guilde du Livre, 1954 and 1957.

90. Platon, Le Banquet ou de l'amour, Lausanne, La Rencontre, 1951; and Homère, L'Odyssée, Paris, Club français du livre, 1955.

91. Pay, p.131. We may add that a German writer who influenced Jaccottet directly, Hölderlin, was a notable Hellenophile. To describe Jaccottet as "distant from Bonnefoy's meridional familiarity with 'myth'" (M. Edwards in Prospice 3, 1975, p.5) is thus quite mistaken.

92. L'Entretien des Muses, p.287.

innovation in poetry he says: "Peut-être est-ce la justesse de ton qu'il faut poursuivre d'abord (plutôt que de chercher à inventer des formes nouvelles)".<sup>93</sup> In this respect for the best in tradition he found support from the Italian poet Ungaretti, a major writer very concerned to retain links with the past, or in T.S. Eliot, who declares in East Coker:

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under  
conditions  
That seem unpropitious.

Such a view is, of course, no reason for ignoring modern experiments, and Jaccottet is far from uninformed or uncurious about them - his boutade about "la Joconde", quoted above, happens to occur in an essay on Michel Deguy, whose name scarcely figures on the reading-lists of reactionaries.

93. In Pour l'art, cahier 24, May-June 1952, p.7. Cf these words from Hölderlin's projected preface to Hyperion: "Je ne souhaitais nullement qu'il fût original (...)" je n'aime rien tant que ce qui est vieux comme le monde" (quoted with approval in Gustave Roud, p.41).

### III

#### REASON AND IGNORANCE

In 1946, having completed his Licence de Lettres, Jaccottet moved to Paris which was his main place of residence until 1953, although he continued to spend shorter or longer periods in Lausanne. His chief source of income was the Swiss industrialist and publisher Henry-Louis Mermod, who was a great patron of the arts in Lausanne. Mermod published in 1946 Jaccottet's selection of Jammes' poetry; and followed this in 1947 with Jaccottet's own Requiem, and his commissioned translation of Mann's Tod in Venedig - an unusual enterprise, since important works by major living authors are rarely entrusted to such young translators, and a French version of this one had already appeared. Jaccottet was now employed by Mermod as publisher's agent in Paris; and in the course of one task, the writing of biographical notes on French artists for four luxury volumes on Le Dessin français (Mermod, Lausanne, 1948, 1951, 1952, 1953), he acquired a solid introduction to art-history.

Mermod helped to support the young poet, during some critical years, with friendship and encouragement as well as money: he was presently to commission, at least informally, the work that became La Promenade sous les arbres (Mermod, Lausanne, 1957).<sup>1</sup> The tribute that Jaccottet wrote on his death recalls his "fraîcheur d'âme profonde", and says:

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1. Republished 1961. On the first page Jaccottet speaks of "la coïncidence du désir d'un éditeur ami avec mon intention confuse" (Prom, p.15).

"c'était merveille qu'elle eût subsisté chez l'homme d'affaires et d'argent qu'il était aussi", and again "sa vitalité, sa gourmandise (de toutes choses, matérielles ou spirituelles) m'ont été salutaires".<sup>2</sup>

That these years in Paris were valuable for Jaccottet is apparent from the literary friends he made then, in circles far wider than those of Lausanne: they were first of all the group responsible for the review 84 - Alfred Kern, Henri Thomas, André Dhôtel, Pierre Leyris - and later the men who revived the Nouvelle Revue Française - Paulhan, Arland, Tardieu.<sup>3</sup> If Jaccottet speaks later of "un monde littéraire que je n'aimais pas"<sup>4</sup>, he probably means the commercial ballyhoo and the prestigious literary congresses rather than the personal contacts with individual writers such as these. Besides, all those who wrote in French then (if not now) had to come to terms with Paris - even Ramuz had spent several years there. As it happens, Jaccottet has written very little about the everyday stimuli of the metropolis, the most notable passage being an evocation of human misery in L'Obscurité. But that is no reason to understate the knowledge and experience he gained in Paris - understanding of visual arts as well as literature, of the past as much as the present.

In 1946 also, Jaccottet made the first of numerous trips to Italy, referred to in various poems of L'Effraie, and later in a short section of Paysages avec figures absentes. It was then that he learnt to read and speak Italian, which he had never studied at school.<sup>5</sup> And it was then that he

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2. In Revue de Belles-Lettres 96, Lausanne, 1972, I. p.33.

3. Clerval p.10. He mentions also the names of Ponge, Lambrichs, Brenner, Bonnefoy, du Bouchet and Dupin.

4. Montaigne-Preis 1972, p.40.

5. Jaccottet's first translation from the Italian appeared

first met Giuseppe Ungaretti, whose friend and translator he became.<sup>6</sup> Aspects of the Italian's work that attracted Jaccottet were the relationship of modern man to tradition, and the theme of the lost paradise. His earliest published note about him says: "La poésie d'Ungaretti ne se lasse jamais de reposer le problème du temps et de la séparation d'avec Dieu" and that it conveys to the reader those "rares instants [où] l'on croit revoir le Jardin".<sup>7</sup> He might almost be writing about Gustave Roud.

The wish to explore Italy suggests the adventurousness of a young man still seeking an adult identity, and so do the amatory pursuits touched on likewise in the poems of this period. The tone of Jaccottet's poems, however, is now tentative and unassertive, as if contact with a wider world had undermined the adolescent confidence of his Lausanne writings. But more significantly, the tentativeness corresponds better to Jaccottet's idea of the poet's rôle, and enables him to evoke more faithfully the images and intuitions that are his central concern.

His essential works of these years are the slim volume "L'Effraie et autres poésies (1947-50), and the first section of L'Ignorant, called "Dans les rues d'une ville", and dated 1950-52.<sup>8</sup> Of the circumstances of their composition, Jaccottet gives this retrospective account:

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5.(contd) in 1950.

6. In this case his youthful ambition to meet a great poet must have overcome his natural timidity. Ungaretti was 37 years his senior - but at least Jaccottet knew he was fluent in French.
7. In Pour l'art, Nov-Dec. 1948, pp.10-11.
8. L'Ignorant, p.11. Its cover and title-page state falsely "Poems 1952-56", perhaps because L'Effraie had not appeared until 1953. L'Effraie's dates, given as 1947-50 (p.60), themselves disagree with the title of

Comme je vivais assez seul, à l'écart (ni en ermite, ni en anarchiste, plutôt comme un personnage quelconque, presque inexistant, toujours excessivement craintif), une certaine qualité de silence était préservée autour de moi; à la faveur de ce silence (au reste discontinu), des émotions, des sensations, des rêveries, des souvenirs se condensaient en moi et, de là, à de certains moments, semblaient se déposer presque tout seuls en mots sur la page; plus qu'ils ne s'y déposaient, en fait, ils s'y accomplissaient, s'y achevaient. Ce qui déterminait ces moments, je suppose que c'était un certain degré de pression de l'émotion au-delà duquel la garder inexprimée eût été pénible; donc une certaine intensité de la vie qui je vivais. C'était faire là, tout bêtement, l'expérience de l'"inspiration", mais alors déjà sans accorder à ce mot une valeur magique, mystérieuse ou sublime.<sup>9</sup>

One may contrast this view of creativity with the accounts of Gautier and others to whom writing poetry is a matter of conscious craftsmanship. Its full implications will be discussed later in this chapter.

L'Effraie et autres poésies is not a chronological collection,<sup>10</sup> nor a carefully ordered anthology - that is clear from section titles like "Quelques sonnets", "Poésies diverses", and "Fragments d'un récit". Its coherence lies in its tone and feeling - a characteristically confidential tone, voicing melancholy and resignation - and in the recurrent theme of the passing of time and of beauty. This is announced by the first poem:

déjà sous notre peau si chaude perce l'os... (P/E, p.25).

The association of the title itself with "effroi" and "effrayer" is suggested by the epigraph from Buffon: "ils

#### 8.(contd) Poésie 1946-1967.

9. In NRF, March 1976, p.64. Jaccottet here admits to poor memory of this period, understates the amount he corrected poems in this way, and indeed names L'Ignorant but not L'Effraie. The account remains convincing enough, and the best he has given.
10. The first poem is one of the latest in time, judging from the very different version of it that appeared in Pour l'art III, 13, July-Aug. 1950, p.14. Other poems published before 1953 are: "Comme je suis un étranger..."



regardent l'effraie comme le messenger de la mort", and confirmed later at the start of Leçons: "Autrefois/ moi l'effrayé, l'ignorant...".<sup>11</sup> The poet senses transience and mortality in himself, in love, in travel, and in the changing seasons.

This consciousness of death makes the poet write of ageing with a resignation one associates with much older writers. The third sonnet begins:

Je sais maintenant que je ne possède rien,  
pas même ce bel or qui est feuilles pourries,  
encore moins ces jours volant d'hier à demain...

and concludes with these pessimistic lines:

... Je vois ma santé se réduire,  
pareille à ce feu bref au-devant du brouillard  
qu'un vent glacial avive, efface... Il se fait tard.  
(P/E p.28)

The footsteps of death sound right through the fifth sonnet, from "le mot sera proche/ de ta mort" to the final line "d'un à l'autre mot tu es plus vieux". (P/E, p.30). Echoes of these words occur elsewhere - "Je pars, je continue à vieillir" (P/E, p.31), "je voyageais, je vieillissais".<sup>12</sup> Sometimes the motif seems unduly self-conscious, but at best the poet's "je" is a disembodied voice whispering in melancholy verses:

il ne me reste que ces roses s'effeuillant  
dans l'herbe où toute voix se tait avec le temps.  
(P/E, p.36)

10. (contd) in Pour l'art, II, 3, March-April 1949, p.11; and "Portovenere" in La Suisse contemporaine, Jan. 1949, p.9, alongside an uncollected sonnet entitled "La Grange".

11. P/L, p.160. Cf El, pp.183-4. According to Robert, the noun "effraie" derives from "orfraie" under the semantic attraction of "effrayer".

12. L'Effraie, p.29. From a poem not included in Poésie 1946-67.

Jaccottet's chief reaction to mortality is to counsel acceptance, and it is himself he is counselling throughout, not just in the "Sois tranquille" of that fifth sonnet. If one of the reasons for travelling was "pour l'oubli de la mort", then that obliviousness is soon forgotten (P/E, p.35). One cannot escape the passing of time and of youth. But perhaps acceptance can even be a source of strength, since it heightens our awareness of the transient world around us:

Quand même je saurais le réseau de mes nerfs  
aussi précaire que la toile d'araignée,  
je ne louerais pas moins ces merveilles de vert,  
ces colonnes, même choisies pour la cognée... (P/E, p.46)

If beautiful things are ephemeral, then are not ephemeral things beautiful? Perhaps mortality itself can be celebrated in poetry:

La mort, pour un instant, a cet air de fraîcheur  
de la fleur perce-neige... (P/E, p.40)

These poems testify to the paradoxical reasoning which J.-P. Richard later tried to define thus: "ne fuyons pas notre mortalité, mais assumons-la bien au contraire, cultivons-en ardemment les signes, les images, ce sera le meilleur moyen de nous élancer au-delà d'elle".<sup>13</sup> Already in his review of L'Effraie, L.-G. Gros declared "L'originalité essentielle de Jaccottet réside peut-être dans la façon qu'il a d'allier une conscience sereine de la mort avec l'appétit de la vie".<sup>14</sup> There is indeed a positive impulse and aspiration in this poetry of acceptance. And if "appétit" overstates it, Gros soon finds it a more apt phrase: "Un inventaire de la beauté inscrite dans les choses".

13. J.-P. Richard, Onze études sur la poésie moderne, p.267.

14. L.-G. Gros in Cahiers du sud, March 1954, p.475.

The beauty examined in L'Effraie is that of the visible world of natural things subject to time. It is beauty without a capital letter, as the poem "La Traversée" insists:

Ce n'est pas la Beauté que j'ai trouvée ici (...)  
mais celle qui s'enfuit, la beauté de ce monde.<sup>15</sup>

Jaccottet makes the same distinction, not surprisingly, in prefacing his translation of Plato's Symposium:

La beauté absolue qu'évoquent Socrate et Baudelaire a sans doute l'éclat insoutenable du diamant; et la lumière voilée de l'amour sur un visage humain, déjà si difficile à faire naître et surtout à ne pas éteindre aussitôt, peut nous paraître plus précieuse.<sup>16</sup>

In L'Effraie, this earthly beauty is seen less in human faces than in natural landscapes. And these are not as imaginary or abstract as they were in Jaccottet's earlier poems: they are particular places observed at specific times. Thus one of the notes entitled "La Semaïson" is marked "La Seine le 14 mars 1947" (P/E, p.42-3); and the isolated line which ends it, "Quelqu'un allume un feu de branches sur la rive", is a real observation not a poetic image (though it does acquire a poetic resonance). Similarly, the phrase quoted above, "ces merveilles de vert" refers to real trees in the Bois de Meudon south-west of Paris, which is the setting of the four pages entitled "Les Eaux et les forêts",<sup>17</sup> with its description of Sunday crowds. Not that such associations of place and time need be explained to the reader - "Ninfa" (P/E, p.36) seems a distracting riddle - just that these poems proceed from real sensations and experiences, in a way.

15. P/E, p.38. Clerval comments (p.44): "C'est la beauté périssable, émouvante de se savoir éphémère, bref surgissement de l'instant, scintillement ou écume dansant à la crête des eaux qui est célébrée par le poète". Like Clerval, I interpret the rather ambiguous "l'autre" of line 5 as "the secondary kind", i.e. lower-case beauty.

16. Platon, Le Banquet, Lausanne, 1951, p.14.

17. P/E, pp.45-48. These are referred to again in Prom,

that Requiem did not. One might note the frequency of demonstratives ("ce lit", "ces forêts", "ce printemps", "cette chambre", "ce dimanche", "ceci") as an index of the presence of things in these poems, which mostly use the present tense.

One of the more sarcastic criticisms made of Jaccotet's work takes up this particular point, finding in it mere prosaic loquacity. It is in Alain Bosquet's impressive essay Verbe et Vertige,<sup>18</sup> which quotes these not untypical lines from "Les Eaux et les forêts":

Les oiseaux ne sont pas nombreux; tout juste si,  
très loin, où l'aubépine éclaire les taillis,  
le coucou chante... (P/E, p.45)

Bosquet denies that this is poetry (as if to say "and landscape painting is not art"), ignoring its intensity and the metrical emphasis given to the last phrase. But modern metaphorical poetry, the invention of verbal beauty, is not the only kind; Jaccotet's inventory poetry is valid too. L.-G. Gros understood this when he wrote: "En un sens il n'y a là que platitudes, mais c'est réaction à l'abus du stupéfiant image, et ces platitudes sont la trame même de la vie".<sup>19</sup>

In any case, Jaccotet's poems are not mere inventory; they can become vertiginous too, if not in Bosquet's sense:

17.(contd) pp.95-6. A slightly later poem (P/I, p.60) is set in the nearby suburb of Sceaux.

18. Paris, 1961, pp.99-100. Bosquet later gives a very favourable review of Airs in Combat (8 June 1967, p.13).

19. Gros, loc. cit. Jaccotet admits that opinions may differ on this point: he discusses "prosaic poetry" in La Promenade (pp.122-6), and in a review of 1959 (NRF, Sept. 1959, p.495) he quotes from p.111 of Roger Caillois' Art Poétique: "Il est une poésie sans images, presque imperceptible, d'un premier abord toute comparable à la prose (...) Mais la différence lentement se fait connaître. La banalité apparente manifeste peu à peu de singuliers pouvoirs".

et la parole n'est ni plus ni moins utile  
 que ces chatons de saule en terrain de marais:  
 peu importe qu'ils tombent en poussière s'ils brillent"  
 (P/E, p.48)

His observations are always related (though not always explicitly) to his principal theme. This is most obvious with the spider of "L'Intérieur" (P/E, p.34) and the screech-owl of the title-poem. But it is equally true of the brief notes headed "La Semailson":

La vie est toujours plus loin. (P/E, p.40)  
 Ce qui me reste, en peu de temps je le dénombre.  
 (P/E, p.41)

Tout m'a fait signe: les lilas pressés de vivre  
 et les enfants qui égaraient leurs balles dans  
 les parcs (...) L'air tissait de ces riens  
 une toile tremblante. Et je la déchirais,  
 à force d'être seul et de chercher des traces.  
 (P/E, p.44)

The reason for Jaccottet's close scrutiny of the visible world is his wish to find in these "signs" something that might counterbalance the burden of mortality:

Les oiseaux journaliers me sauveront peut-être.<sup>20</sup>

The word "signe", taken by Jaccottet from the vocabulary of Gustave Roud, appears also in some of his articles at this time. Thus in 1949 he writes: "Le détail devenu signe, voilà peut-être une des issues de secours pour la poésie menacée",<sup>21</sup> and in 1951: "je ne peux pas ne pas m'accrocher (...) à deux ou trois signes qui m'ont été faits, et dont je sens qu'ils sont de nature à résister, peut-être, à l'épouvante".<sup>22</sup> The sense-data he presents in his poems, and the very futility of this wish, certainly add truth and resonance

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20. L'Effraie, p.41.

21. In La Suisse contemporaine, May 1949, p.245.

22. In Pour l'art, IV, 17, Lausanne, March-April 1951, p.20.

to his reflective theme:

... Je n'ai rien inventé:  
voici le chien qui dort, les oiseaux rassemblés,  
les ouvriers courbés (...) La leur et ma jeunesse  
s'usent comme un roseau... (P/E, p.36)

An important minor theme in L'Effraie is that of love. As well as the emotional inspiration love is said to give to poets, Jaccottet sought the particular insights by which love resembles other sorts of ecstatic experience. In his earliest poems, however, it had seemed that the experience was above all disquieting; as if love were a domain where the difficulty of becoming an adult was particularly great.

Souffles-tu que le ciel menace, trop lucide,  
Au-delà des rideaux les rites du plaisir,  
L'ombre déjà retombe et résigne au désir  
Ce double front rougi qui s'écorche de rides!<sup>23</sup>

Of all Jaccottet's works L'Effraie is the one where love is most often a subject, a pretext for writing. The appearance of the names Michelle and Dominique, otherwise unidentified, along with association of love with travel, suggest that this was a time of affairs and adventures - but of these the poet does not choose to recount more than mere "Fragments d'un récit". From the poem of this title<sup>24</sup> one can catch only snippets of information: a love affair that was beautiful and is now over; a woman who lived in the north; a memory that has largely melted and prompts the question: "Notre fête secrète eut-elle vraiment lieu?"; and the final suggestion that she who has left him is pretending to return - all this told by a narrator seeking some sort of "demeure". The other poems of the volume tell us little more: they concentrate on the feelings of the poet, usually

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23. "Les Iris" in La Suisse contemporaine, July 1945, p.614.

24. L'Effraie, pp.39-43.

alone and melancholy, romantic feelings delicately expressed. The object of his affection, meanwhile, is hidden behind the pronoun "toi" with a discretion announced in the very first page: "Combien de choses/ j'en pourrais dire, et de tes yeux..."

The most concentrated treatment of love occurs, predictably, in the sonnets, of which the second line is: "toi ma douceur, ma blessure, mon bien". (P/E, p.26). The "douceur" and "tendresse" evoked in that poem <sup>we</sup> is developed in the next by means of extravagant nature imagery, and in a later fragment about past happiness:

Tu as été ma sauvegarde, ma réserve,  
sous l'herbe ta beauté ruisselant fut ma source,  
celle qui dissimule aux regards sa clarté.  
Tu as été le lit du plus parfait silence.<sup>25</sup>

The mention of "blessure", however, warns us of the pain of love, and indeed that very sonnet evokes "le sang/ fuyant qui nous emmêle, et nous secoue" (P/E, p.26) which denotes at once passion and the passage of time. The last poem of the book states the idea more explicitly: "Toute douceur, celle de l'air/ ou de l'amour, a la cruauté pour revers". (P/E, p.47). The other sonnets are indeed poems of separation, separation that is progressively more definitive, as the "absente" of the second becomes the "émigrante" of the third. These "quelques sonnets" are not of course presented as being a sequence; but their apparent progression culminating in "Sois tranquille..." (P/E, p.30) is not likely to be accidental and certainly conforms to the whole volume's orientation towards mortality.

The ecstasy of love is not denied, but it is too momen-

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25. Ibid., p.40.

tary, "trop pareille à l'éphémère",<sup>26</sup> a touching of two separate people on "un lit de passage" (P/E, p.29). It cannot be held or immobilized; indeed its brevity makes it seem unreal: "Tu partiras. Déjà ton corps est moins réel/ que le courant qui l'use" (P/E, p.33). In one place the fluttering of insects around a lamp prompts this summary of the poet's experience:

Moi aussi j'avais cru en toi, et ta lumière  
m'a fait brûler, puis m'a quitté.  
(...) et moi je suis resté dans l'ombre. (P/E, p.44)

The fourth sonnet expresses above all his sense of futility in writing about love that has departed: "je m'entête à fouiller ces décombres..." (P/E, p.29). The poet feels he ought to abandon it all to oblivion; but instead, he says, "comme un chien je flaire un parfum répandu", as though in spite of himself he needs to treasure that experience. We may be glad that he felt that need, and added a few pieces of nostalgic beauty to the store of traditional romantic verse. His own gain was in the final integration of the love-theme with that of death, shown in the fifth sonnet, where a voice as of a prophet or sage makes this pronouncement:

Même quand tu bois à la bouche qui étanche  
la pire soif, la douce bouche avec ses cris

doux, même quand tu serres avec force le noeud  
de vos quatre bras pour être bien immobile  
dans la brûlante obscurité de vos cheveux,

elle vient...<sup>27</sup>

Death is ever-approaching, and we live within the menace of

26. Ibid., p.29.

27. P/E, p.30. We may recall Rilke's first elegy:  
"Ist (die Nacht) den Liebenden leichter?  
Ach, sie verdecken sich nur miteinander ihr Los".



its arrival. This truth came to be felt by Jaccottet as inseparable from the full authenticity of any experience. And love was a domain in which this consciousness was made particularly keen and deep.

If L'Effraie evokes so often the spiritual pain of love - there is no reason to suppose that any physical wounding was involved - that may be because of the high hopes Jaccottet placed in love. He seems to have wished, like many other poets, to utter the great cry "Love's not time's fool". But none of his experiences could justify it, and he lamented all the more.

It may be noted in passing that L'Effraie contains the only poems of Jaccottet concerned with travel, though that is later the subject of some prose-writing.<sup>28</sup> Judged as evocations of foreign places, his Italian scenes are disappointing. Fortunately, however, that is not the way to judge them: they are poems of feeling, in which the place is less important to the poet's state of mind than the woman he is thinking about, or his own aimlessness. His reasons for travelling are stated ironically:

Nous avons voyagé pour la douceur de l'air,  
pour l'oubli de la mort, pour la Toison dorée...  
Malgré le chemin fait, nous restons à l'orée...  
(P/E, p.35).

The highest hopes one has of travel are not fulfilled, since "la beauté" is not given to us "aux lieux étranges" (P/E, p.38); change of place does not alter the human condition:

il faut, même en Sicile, accepter sur nos mains  
les mille épines de la pluie... (P/E, p.35)

The value of the travel-motif lies indeed in its connection .....

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28. L'Autriche, Lausanne, 1966, and "Les cormorans", in NRF, Oct. 1974.

with the theme of time: the verb "partir" is naturally associated with death, since travelling is not just a metaphor for ageing. Furthermore, the poet's insecure identity is expressed at various points in terms of the words "étranger" et "patrie", which ultimately have nothing to do with his Swiss citizenship:

Comme je suis un étranger dans notre vie (P/E, p.27)

... Il ne faut pas que l'étranger qui marche  
se retourne... (P/E, p.32)

This sense of being out of place, of <sup>being</sup> "de passage", is an existential one and contributes to the elegiac colouring of the poems.

The coherence of themes in L'Effraie is perhaps less remarkable than the unified style. L.-G. Gros, who expressed reservation about Jaccottet's attitude of resignation, "idéologiquement contestable (...) apparemment sans objet",<sup>29</sup> was very taken with the accessibility of his style:

nulle trace d'ésotérisme chez Jaccottet. Il est limpide comme de l'eau de roche, ce qui constitue déjà une originalité. Il raisonne même, mais toujours en poète, par images, les explicitant (et non les expliquant) au lieu de procéder, comme il est de mode, par notations discontinues (...) Sans tous les enjambements qui rompent le rythme, restituent le mode, les hésitations de la conversation, une telle poésie verserait dans un didactisme pompeux.<sup>30</sup>

A clarity, a naturalness that is often hesitant and sometimes even clumsy - these were not marks of Requiem. In L'Effraie, Jaccottet suddenly spoke in the individual tone of voice that has remained his own. His delicacy and sensitivity become convincing for the first time in these more modest, more appropriate poems.

29. Gros in Cahiers du sud, March 1954, p.476.

30. Ibid., p.474.

The author's account, quoted previously, of the circumstances of writing these poems is concerned to deny that they are products of long and conscious effort:

le travail consistait beaucoup moins à "bâtir" à "forger", à "ériger" une oeuvre qu'à permettre à un courant de passer...<sup>31</sup>

That current, favoured but not created by intense feelings, is the reason he gives for the work's inner coherence and ability to move the reader:

si ces poèmes, aujourd'hui, atteignent parfois un inconnu, ils ne le peuvent que pour avoir puisé à ce fonds commun dont nous ne pouvons être coupés, semble-t-il, sans dépérir.<sup>32</sup>

Those remarks, profound as they probably are, do not nearly satisfy the questioning mind - and Jaccottet has spent many pages reflecting on the mysterious fount of poetic "inspiration", notably in La Promenade sous les arbres.

Before discussing his personal theories, however, we can usefully examine L'Effraie from the outside in terms of form and prosody. As collections of modern poetry go, this is surprisingly regular. The vast majority of poems are in alexandrins, and most of the others retain a single fixed metre throughout. The author has apparently chosen to write isometric verse, whereas in Requiem he often varied the lengths of his lines. A parti-pris of regularity is most obvious in the five sonnets placed together straight after the title-poem, and the frequent use of quatrains (usually with alternating rhymes) also testifies to it. Now since even imperfect sonnets are not created accidentally merely by "de légères retouches, distraites", we cannot fully accept

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31. In NRF, March 1976, p.67.

32. Ibid., p.65.

Jaccottet's recent claim: "je n'ai jamais cherché une forme".<sup>33</sup> Besides, rhyme is common in L'Effraie - it is more often present than absent - and there is some regularity in the fact that few rhymes occur in poems that are not rhymed throughout. The author seems to have accepted both rhymed and rhymeless verse, but not a half-breed form with equal shares of rhymed and rhymeless lines.

A very interesting case in this respect is the title-poem. It is typical of the rhymeless kind of poem in that enjambements are numerous (they are less common in the rhymed poems), and in that internal rhyme and assonance (particularly in the opening lines) further attenuates the alexandrin metre. One may even doubt the appropriateness of the traditional term alexandrin for these stumbling lines which just happen to count twelve syllables (and the last has one mute 'e' too many). The unexpected truth, however, is that in 1950 Jaccottet published a poem essentially the same where all the lines rhymed in pairs. Here it is:

#### L'EFFRAIE

"Certain minuit de juin que nous étions couchés  
dans cette barque où, pour nos soi-disant péchés,  
nous dérivions vers l'aube à coup sûr décevante,  
elle dormait et moi veillant, mais l'âme absente,  
je me trouvais soudain sur les bords prodigieux  
de la nuit. Des forêts s'élevaient en ces lieux  
d'où la ville est pareille à une nébuleuse.  
Elle avait détourné sa beauté fabuleuse  
et ses yeux, plus beaux que l'ambre, ne brûlaient point.  
Ainsi j'errais dans les ténèbres, quand de loin  
j'entendis s'approcher une plainte perdue,  
semblable à ces lueurs qui raient l'étendue  
des nuits d'été. On aurait dit des feux-follets

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33. Ibid., pp.64, 65. At least he underlines, meaning that the form somehow "emerged". Note that there is an uncollected sonnet from this period entitled "La Grange" in La Suisse contemporaine, Jan. 1949, p.8; and that "L'Histoire de l'avare", written in about 1951, may then have been considered as a sonnet (L'Ignorant p.13).

ou des ombres dans les enfers qui s'appelaient,  
 cherchant, sans doute en vain, le moyen de descendre  
 au moindre des jardins, par horreur de leur cendre...  
 Ou bien c'était l'oiseau nocturne, simplement,  
 celui qu'on ne voit pas mais que trop on entend,  
 nommé l'effraie: c'est nous qu'il appelait peut-être,  
 en ce sombre minuit de juin, criant la piètre  
 fin de tout cela et de nous-mêmes; et moi,  
 je l'enviais d'avoir au moins l'abri des bois,  
 d'être l'appel et non l'appelé... La banlieue  
 verrait traîner des chiens dans les rues bientôt bleues,  
 elle allait s'éveiller, et nous retomberions  
 dans cet abîme où sombre à son tour Orion...  
 L'oiseau se tut. Resta le mystérieux amour,  
 l'odeur des corps, les douces mains, les bruits du jour".<sup>34</sup>

This presents a literary puzzle with two possible solutions. The first is that Jaccottet took this rhymed poem of 28 lines and condensed it, suppressing all rhymes and frequently breaking what was a fairly regular rhythm. The second solution is that the unrhymed shorter version is closer to his original spontaneous draft, and that the 1950 version was a polished expansion of it which he then later rejected as an unsuccessful experiment. I find this second solution more credible, despite the dates.<sup>35</sup> In any case the conventionality of the rhymed version compares unfavourably with the more individual rhymeless one, which has indeed more spontaneity (whether real or contrived).

The case of this poem supports L.-G. Gros' decision to stress the irregularity of Jaccottet's style, a decision made also by a later reviewer, Jean Roudaut:

La simplicité du vocabulaire, l'absence de majuscules au début des lignes, les enchaînements et les ruptures des vers, l'utilisation du e muet (...) donnent aux textes poétiques une tournure naturelle et boiteuse.<sup>36</sup>

34. In Pour l'art III, 13, Lausanne, July-Aug. 1950, p.14.

35. The incident that prompted the poem occurred at Sèvres, according to a note written nearly 25 years later (Journées, p.61, Dec. 1972), which suggests an original draft dating from June 1948. Jaccottet reveals too that his supposed "effraie" was really a "chat-huant".

36. In Magazine Littéraire 45, Oct. 1970, p.49.

It is a pity that Jaccottet did not decide against regular rhyme in some other places, such as these clumsy lines -

Il commence à pleuvoir. On a changé d'année.  
Tu vois bien qu'aux regrets notre âme est condamnée.  
(P/E, p.35)

-where the unnatural word-order emphasizes only the conventionality of the diction. Usually, however, normal word-order is preserved by enjambement, which has this function and virtue. As Emilie Noulet puts it: "ayant perdu son agressivité ordinaire, le rejet n'est plus, comme chez Verlaine, que la pente sur quoi glissent les vers".<sup>37</sup>

Mme Noulet even goes as far as to stress the unconventionality of Jaccottet's sonnets: "Le poète utilise paradoxalement le cadre rigide du sonnet au profit de la souplesse".<sup>38</sup> This is due to the enjambements, since the rhyming and scansion are almost totally correct. We may note here Jaccottet's reaction in 1946 to the sonnets of Jean Cassou: "Respectant les exigences fécondes de ce cadre, il a su y réintroduire la liberté, la fraîcheur et surtout les espaces mêmes du mystère; ceci entre autres choses par le jeu des rythmes rompus...".<sup>39</sup> Jaccottet's admiration for the supple Sonette an Orpheus of Rilke dates from this period also. His own most striking exploitation of the form is the fifth sonnet, "Sois tranquille...", which seems to echo Baudelaire's "Recueillement". Since the poem has a fixed length, the reader knows in advance the arrival time of "le mot qui sera à la fin" (line 2). And there was extra suspense in the original edition, since there that final word was not yet

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37. Noulet, Alphabet critique II, Bruxelles 1965, p.329.

38. Loc. cit.

39. In Formes et couleurs, 1946, no 1.

legible, the reader had to turn the page to find the ending:

...d'un à l'autre mot tu es plus vieux.<sup>40</sup>

That example is particularly self-conscious, and in any case the sonnets form only a small part of L'Effraie. But some attention must be given to the question of why Jaccottet wrote regular verse at all. The answer seems to be that he had a fundamental preference for regular poetry.<sup>41</sup> His interest in modern experiments in poetic form did not blind him to the virtues of regularity in the great poetry of the past. He attempts to define one of these virtues in La Promenade, after references to Homer, Dante, Hölderlin, Leopardi, Baudelaire, Verlaine and Claudel:

il y a d'abord un rythme, volontaire mais plus ou moins soumis à des règles conventionnelles, rythme dont le principal effet est sans doute de dégager immédiatement le texte de tout souci d'utilité afin qu'il flotte dans l'air un peu au-dessus de l'utile.<sup>42</sup>

Jaccottet's wish to emulate the masters of the past was thus one reason for his use of regular verse. Another reason was literary friendships formed in Paris. Three of the writers he met on settling there, André Dhôtel, Pierre Leyris and Henri Thomas, seem to have encouraged him to choose a more modest style and more everyday subjects. The best-known of these men, Henri Thomas, is as much a poet as a novelist and translator, but the "classicism" of his style has caused him to be somewhat underrated. His reflections about poetics can be judged from his collected essays

40. P/E, p.30. As Clerval remarks (p.43): "le cheminement de la parole poétique se confond avec le temps qui fuit et s'avance vers son terme inéluctable".

41. In 1956 he could speak of "mes goûts invétérés pour la poésie régulière" (in Gazette de Lausanne, 9-10 June, 1956).

42. Prom, pp.124-5.

La Chasse aux trésors,<sup>43</sup> which begins by regretting that Rimbaud's fame has caused Verlaine to be neglected. His own debt to Verlaine is clear from his poems written in short metres, a style Jaccottet tried too in some poems of L'Effraie and L'Ignorant. In Thomas's verse, fixed and regular forms do not stand in the way of his individual tone and accent; and the feeling of insecurity they contain is not unlike that of Jaccottet. In a review dated 1949, Jaccottet remarks on Thomas's avoidance of the verbalism shown by many poets, notably Surrealist ones, saying:

Dans ce langage intime (...) la poésie me paraît retrouver un pouvoir bien plus grand que celui, presque toujours suspect, qu'elle avait cru conquérir par la libération de toute règle. Ce retour aux formes fixes (...) n'a rien à voir, cependant, avec (...) Valéry; et ce qui l'en distingue, entre autres, c'est précisément une certaine modestie de ton...<sup>44</sup>

This simplicity of Thomas's verse results from a discreet mastery of language: "on ne s'aperçoit plus qu'il y a un style, des alexandrins, ou des rimes". In brief, Thomas showed that "le vers régulier n'est pas mort...il se prête merveilleusement aux simples confidences".<sup>45</sup> Jaccottet was even then proving the same point with the poems of L'Effraie.

Thomas was at that time not alone in following a more Verlainien tradition. An older and greater example was Supervielle, of whom Jaccottet had this to say in 1946:

Beaucoup de poètes s'imaginent dompteurs, mais Supervielle, plus humble, et parce qu'il aime, se contente d'apprivoiser (...) Supervielle ne dit rien qu'à mi-voix, comme s'il avait peur de faire mal, ou de mal faire (...). Choses incertaines, choses

43. Paris, Gallimard, 1961.

44. In La Suisse contemporaine, Oct. 1949, pp.550-1.

45. In La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, 2 Aug. 1950, p.1.



devenantes, que trahirait une voix trop sûre; que fait vivre au contraire dans leur tremblante présence un langage adroitement gauche, libre, comme hésitant...<sup>46</sup>

We could, perhaps, fairly object that Jaccottet overestimated the importance of form at this point in his career. He would not today make extreme statements like this one of 1950: "la poésie est affaire d'ordre et de règle ou elle n'est pas".<sup>47</sup>

But such extreme positions are not uncommon from creative artists involved in their own creative dilemmas; and perhaps Jaccottet still needed at that time to contain certain pressures inside him such as had produced the Trois poèmes aux démons of 1945. But he has certainly never departed from his more general preference for modesty rather than revolt, a preference stated in this note of 1949:

Il est peut-être moins grandiose, et plus difficile, de s'essayer à une poésie modeste, patiente, presque invisible, et gardant son mystère jusque dans la convention, que de crier des blasphèmes sur les toits.<sup>48</sup>

Although L'Effraie was not published until 1953, it contains no poems later than 1950. Those written between these dates became the first section of L'Ignorant. Its title, "Dans les rues d'une ville", comes from the opening line of one poem:

Dans les rues d'une ville où je n'habite qu'en image...<sup>49</sup>  
which implies that the poet doesn't feel he belongs in Paris. He depicts himself as "maladroit" and "solitaire", as "celui qui vieillit sans patrie" (P/I, p.56). These poems present a number of images of the big city, to add to the suburban

46. In Formes et Couleurs, 1946, No.1.

47. In Pour l'art, Jan.-Feb. 1950, p.14.

48. In Pour l'art, March-April 1949, p.13. He voices similar opinions in Montaigne-Preis 1972, pp.40-41.

49. L'Ignorant, p.16. Five poems from this section were

scenes included in L'Effraie. But it is not so much depiction as denunciation of the city:

La ville avec ses bruits, ses grottes, sa clarté  
n'est qu'un des noms pour ces grands empires de sable...  
(P/I, p.53)

In the poem "Débris",<sup>50</sup> the city is a place of human misery, where the poet hears at night "une femme qui aboie":

... quand enfin s'éloignent  
au-delà des stations de ceinture désertes,  
les dernières plaintes, les derniers phares (portant  
leurs feux  
dès lors aux magasins de banlieue), les derniers  
passants glacés, alors tout est prêt pour qu'elle crie,  
la voix qui va saigner sur moi jusqu'au matin.

These experiences are recalled in a prose text of 1954 where Jaccottet describes the dusty room in Montparnasse from which he heard "des querelles et des cris":

ce décor où tout semblait se concerter pour me donner  
le sentiment d'être "au plus bas"...<sup>51</sup>

And yet the unhappiness he mentions in the poems - usually his own unhappiness - is not due to the city but to the human condition itself:

je vois ce qu'il vaut mieux ne pas voir affleurer  
lorsque le tintement de l'heure dans les verres  
annonce une nouvelle insomnie, la croissante  
peur d'avoir peur dans le resserrement de temps,  
l'usure du corps, l'éloignement des défenseurs.  
(P/I, p.59)

One may be surprised, perhaps, at the frequent images of darkness and age - but Jaccottet had (presumably) a tendency to insomnia, in addition to the habit all serious poets share of viewing man sub specie aeternitatis, man as a mortal being rather than as a member of society.

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49. (contd) omitted from Poésie 1946-67.

50. L'Ignorant, pp.14-15. This poem first appeared in Pour l'art, March-April 1952, p.15, with the date "décembre 1951". The notes preceding it declare that "c'est dans les décombres de la vie quotidienne que l'on poursuit malgré tout le scintillement du monde indestructible".

51. In NRF, March 1954, p.558.



...dans un monde de fumées vite dispersé par des vents d'une terrible violence, le mystère subsiste, et dans le mystère l'entrevision du salut, de la victoire toujours possible (...) Rien ne me paraît valoir un effort que la recherche des mots qui n'offusqueraient pas ces fragiles et profondes clartés...<sup>53</sup>

The choice of the verb "offusquer" shows very well how Jaccottet sees his task. It is a delicate one, by the very nature of these intuitions of possible hope, "fragilité extrême qui n'avez cessé de me fuir".<sup>54</sup> It is delicate also because of the treachery of words:

...qui avance  
dans la poussière n'a que son souffle pour tout bien,  
pour toute force qu'un langage peu certain. (P/I, p.24)

On some occasions Jaccottet feels he has had some success with words:

J'ai su pourtant donner des ailes à mes paroles,  
je les voyais tourner en scintillant dans l'air,  
elles me conduisaient vers l'espace éclairé... (P/I, p.61)

He even affirms, at one point, that "la lumière aux paroles/ est plus fidèle qu'aux forêts".<sup>55</sup> But suspicion of language is more typical, suspicion of his own lyrical impulse:

...Ne faut-il pas plutôt  
laisser monter aux murs le silencieux lierre  
de peur qu'un mot de trop ne sépare nos bouches  
et que le monde merveilleux ne tombe en ruine? (P/I, p.58)

In the essay already mentioned he explains this temptation to "fanfaronner": "rien n'est plus difficile que de résister aux paroles qui entraînent, qui saoulent et nous tiennent lieu de protection".<sup>56</sup> To yield to the temptation would somehow betray the truth, would procure a false sense of

53. In NRF, Jan. 1954, p.177.

54. L'Ignorant, p.16; Cf Prom, p.93: "cette énigme ne pouvait être abordée de front, avec cette lourdeur et cette grossièreté".

55. L'Ignorant, p.22.

56. In NRF, Jan. 1954, p.176. Cf. Prom, pp.126-7.

exaltation and security. One is reminded of those mystical writers who refrain from personal rejoicing in their visions, in a spirit of abnegation, lest they lose their deep level of awareness.

It is in this context that we must understand the first poem of this group, "Histoire de l'avare", with its condemnation of pride and possessiveness. The poet or visionary must not, cannot, build up a store of acquired wealth:

s'il prend sa vie ou ses propos pour un trésor,  
il passera ses jours à craindre le voleur.<sup>57</sup>

This subject of reflection was already present in L'Effraie:

La beauté (...) n'est pas donnée à nous qui la forçons,  
pareils à des aventuriers sur les frontières,  
à des avares qui ont peur de la rançon...<sup>58</sup>

A later poem in L'Ignorant sounds the same didactic note:

... seul peut entendre le coeur  
qui ne cherche la possession ni la victoire (P/I, p.60)

This will be a key theme also in L'Obscurité. Starobinski makes this remark about it:

Se prétendre possesseur de la certitude, (...) demander que l'étincellement de l'amour ne tarisse pas: voilà sans doute, aux yeux de Jaccottet, la faute capitale, celle qui est destinée à être le plus durement punie.<sup>59</sup>

It is not just that the momentary vision is immobilized and

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57. L'Ignorant, p.13. Cf. Hölderlin's letter quoted in La Promenade (p.106): "ils sont jaloux de tout ce qui nourrit l'âme et ne peuvent souffrir qu'aucune de leurs paroles ou de leurs actions soit recueillie par d'autres en esprit et changée en flamme. Les insensés!"

58. P/E, p.38. Cf the parenthesis near the start of "Fragments d'un récit":  
Il répond que c'est vivre avarement sa vie,  
qu'il ne croit pas à un amour s'il ne gaspille...  
(L'Effraie, p.39)

59. Preface to Jaccottet, Poésie 1946-67, p.18.

distorted: it is spoilt, and will not return. And that is punishment, in the first instance, for the poet, who cannot write; and more profoundly for the person as a mortal being, since it deprives him of hope. For these reasons Jaccottet counsels modesty, patience and self-effacement. But he does not so much counsel the reader as counsel himself, repeatedly and insistently; the didactic themes are part of the poems' very inspiration. L.-G. Gros recognized this in reviewing them: "Il préserve l'authenticité d'un document psychologique tout en inventant ce qu'il faut bien appeler une morale".<sup>60</sup> It goes without saying that Jaccottet would have liked to aspire to a greater certainty, to visions that were more than ephemeral glimpses.

These considerations lend a poignancy to the last poem in this group, which begins:

Plus je vieillis, et plus je crois en ignorance,  
plus j'ai vécu, moins je possède et moins je règne.<sup>61</sup>

Its title "L'Ignorant", aptly applied to the whole collection, refers at once to the poet's refusal of particular certainties which were really "mensonges", and to the impossibility of any certain knowledge for Man, "ce mourant". To grow in ignorance is at least to shed some of the illusions of youth: ignorance is a safeguard against dogmatism. At the same time it prompts the repeated question: "que reste-t-il?" that will echo through all of Jaccottet's work. This poem and the earlier title-poem, "L'Effraie" can be linked with a prose note of this period, where Jaccottet

60. In Cahiers du sud, June 1958, p.445.

61. P/I, p.63. This develops a motif present in an early sonnet: "Je sais maintenant que je ne possède rien" (P/E, p.28).

relates:

Un Sage d'Orient (...) prétendait qu'à force de sentir sous ses doigts le front dans la main, sa future tête de mort, il n'avait pu faire que ses pensées ne prissent une couleur particulière, et comme une perpétuelle incertitude.<sup>62</sup>

And yet "L'Ignorant" does not declare, as Jaccottet was later tempted to do, that nothing remains, that one must despair. As he puts it in the 1954 essay:

...j'ai commencé par avouer que nous exagérons volontiers les lueurs qui nous éclairent; mais enfin je ne puis pas davantage les réduire.<sup>63</sup>

Or the following year:

Presque toute notre vie est insensée, presque toute elle n'est qu'agitation et sueur de fantômes. S'il n'y avait ce "presque" avec ce qu'il signifie, nous pourrions aussi bien nous avilir ou désespérer.<sup>64</sup>

Ignorance also serves as a safeguard against nihilism: the poet does not lose all respect for the universe, and cannot deny the mysterious voice of hope:

Mais je l'entends vraiment qui parle, et sa parole pénétre avec le jour, encore que bien vague...

"Comme le feu, l'amour n'établit sa clarté que sur la faute et la beauté des bois en cendres..."  
(P/I, p.63)

Light and love can, in spite of everything, be founded on ephemeral beauty. That is an answer to which Jaccottet continued to cling: "quand la pierre, qui semblait si durable, s'est défaite en poussière, que reste-t-il? (...) Peut-être le contraire du fort et du solide. Peut-être un vif regard, l'éclat du soleil aux marais, des paroles incompréhensibles entendues par hasard derrière le mur du

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62. In Pour l'art, March-April 1951, p.19. Cf P/I, p.55: "toute réalité/ dans le coeur où la mort s'affaire/ devient cri, murmure ou larme".

63. In NRF, Jan. 1954, p.177.

64. Prom, p.95, first published in the Gazette de Lausanne, 15-16 Oct. 1955.

jardin?"<sup>65</sup> The paradox is a typical one; and it is a matter not of reason but of intuition, of poetry.

The period Jaccottet spent in Paris was the time when most of his ideas, his reflections of life and poetry, really took shape after the ferment of his student years. They cannot be said to have found coherent form until La Promenade sous les arbres of 1957; yet the preoccupations present in his poems of 1947-52 were ones that changed only gradually in his subsequent writings. Indeed one reason for considering L'Effraie as the true beginning of his oeuvre is that it marks a harmonization of his style with his thinking, the adoption of an individual approach to poetry. The quiet modesty of these poems - contrasting with Trois poèmes aux démons and Requiem - is grounded in subtle self-knowledge.

In attempting to characterize his thought at this time, we must admit that it starts from a very negative view of the human predicament. Jaccottet is unusually conscious of limits, of the threats to man's spirit, of present mortality and future death. It seems difficult to live well, easy to despair.

Alongside this existential pessimism is a very low opinion of modern civilization. The world we inhabit is characterized, in his view, by violence and vulgarity, collapse and disorder, futile agitation and empty noise. And this has made it harder than ever for men to receive inner illumination. The following note about modern urban life dates from 1951:

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65. In Domaine Suisse 1956, Lausanne, Oct.-Nov. 1956, p.66.



Je crois que jamais on n'a tant vécu hors de soi, pour la montre, pour la façade (...) jamais on n'a dispensé plus de tintamarre sur plus de néant, au point que le silence en est devenu insupportable à la plupart d'entre nous.<sup>66</sup>

The much-vaunted advances in twentieth-century technology only prompt Jaccottet's sarcasm: "Nos gros affairistes traversent l'Europe en quelques heures d'avion et nous nous croyons civilisés".<sup>67</sup> Indeed it is axiomatic to him that the central problems of humanity are beyond the reach of science, are of a different order:

Nous pourrions bien, dans la suite des temps, acquérir une connaissance de plus en plus précise de ce que l'on appelait autrefois les abîmes intersidéraux, l'abîme réel n'avait jamais été que figuré symboliquement par ceux-ci, et aucune conquête de l'esprit ne l'avait jamais réduit.<sup>68</sup>

Now these negative views resemble those of many modern writers and thinkers, and Jaccottet does not dwell on them. The positive response he tried to make, however, was more individual. Looking back on his poetic orientation, Jaccottet has said:

"La vraie/est absente" avait écrit Rimbaud, et devaient répéter après lui, généralement moins bien que lui, cent poètes. J'éprouvais, certes un peu vaguement, un sentiment différent; j'entrevois, vaguement, d'autres chemins; redoutant par-dessus tout les formules catégoriques, les refus tranchants

66. Preface to Platon, Le Banquet, 1951, p.15.

67. Ibid., p.11.

68. Prom, p.138 (note of 30 Aug. 1956). Cf E1, pp.127-8: "La science, si prodigieusement habile à peser les astres lointains et à comprendre jusqu'aux mondes que nos sens ne perçoivent plus, échoue à calculer cette part d'innommable ou d'indicible qui devait nous importer plus que tout autre"; and in Autriche (1966, p.145: "Je ne vois pas que l'homme, même dans ses courses de fusée (...) échappe à certaine ombre en lui qui le réduit à un être bien pitoyable". This view lends plausibility to an amusing misprint in the NRF of December 1955, where "sottises de l'ingénieux" (L'Ignorant, p.52) reads "sottises de l'ingénieur".

ou les affirmations péremptoires...<sup>69</sup>

This was by no means to deny the real and, to Jaccottet, obvious presence of "la fausse vie". But it did imply an agnosticism about the value of revolt, and perhaps a measure of hope. (Whether in this Jaccottet showed really more lucidity than the nihilists is a question that cannot be solved by argument). He goes on to say, in the same speech:

voici ce qu'il m'est arrivé de penser, ou d'éprouver plutôt: que c'était peut-être une erreur de vouloir situer à tout prix la poésie, et du même coup, la vraie vie, hors des limites, dans le délire, l'excès, la révolte et la rupture. (...)  
...ce que j'ai essayé de faire, ou ce que ma nature profonde a essayé de faire en moi, ç'a été que la poésie trouvât place, plus naturellement et plus discrètement, à l'intérieur des limites de la vie, d'une vie que risquerait peut-être, cette fois, d'être au contraire trop sage, trop mesurée...<sup>70</sup>

These retrospective remarks can be supported from early critical articles. In 1948 Jaccottet commended Francis Ponge for rejecting Romanticism and Surrealism, with the remark: "Il ne s'agit plus de donner des armes au désordre et à la folie (...) mais de rendre le monde plus habitable".<sup>71</sup> And in 1949 he disagreed with the "retour forcené, par la barbarie, à la poésie magique"<sup>72</sup> advocated by Antonin Artaud. Besides, the poems themselves speak of the same choice of values:

Nous voudrions garder la pureté,  
le mal eût-il plus de réalité.

Nous voudrions ne pas porter de haine,  
bien que l'orage étourdisse les graines.

69. Montaigne-Preis 1972, p.40.

70. Ibid., pp.41-2.

71. In Pour l'art, Sept.-Oct. 1948, p.9. Two years later he praised Ponge's attempts to "chercher, dans un monde troublé, ce qu'il y reste de solide, et les vraies raisons d'espérer" (Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, 12 Oct. 1950).

72. In La Suisse contemporaine, Dec. 1949, p.673.

Qui sait combien les graines sont légères  
redouterait d'adorer le tonnerre. (P/E, p.39)

Similarly, "Les Eaux et les forêts" (P/E, pp.45-48) advocated obedience and submission rather than revolt against destiny; and a somewhat later poem has the line: "L'effacement soit ma façon de resplendir" (P/I, p.76).

These reflections give a large place to ethical considerations, to the need for modesty and patience. For Jaccottet, they are important not only in his poetic aims but also in his poetic practice, in the actual writing of poetry. As we have already seen, he views creativity as a matter not of determined will or persistent exertion but inspiration received - in a passage already quoted,<sup>73</sup> he speaks of a poem springing up from inside and somehow "writing itself" through him. This would happen infrequently, under certain conditions of solitude, silence, and emotional intensity which themselves are insufficient guarantee that a poem would ensue. This very passive view of creativity gives little ground for confidence of vanity, and it explains why Jaccottet devotes less attention to technical matters - prosody and imagery - than to the question of the poet's stance or attitudes. The question "Comment écrire?" is inseparable from the question "Comment vivre?", inasmuch as Jaccottet cannot write unless his life-style favours the "Visitations of the Muses". This is not to say that he does not give a wider human applicability to his ethic of modesty; just that in the first place it is a poetic ethic. The didactic passages in L'Effraie and in subsequent works are initially a response to the question: "How should the poet behave if he wishes to receive inspiration?"

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73. From NRF, March 1976, p.64.

That question is not a new one, of course; even Boileau's ethical poetics show some awareness of it.<sup>74</sup> One modern response can be seen in Rimbaud's phrase: "Il faut se faire l'âme monstrueuse" and in the policy of active experimentation that has followed his example. Jaccottet's response should be viewed in part as a reaction against the Rimbaldian tradition, and in part as a more tentative and passive approach suited to his own personality. In his concern for access to the springs of poetry, he tried to create conditions that would be compatible with inspiration. He wrote this in 1953:

Il y a, pour l'épanouissement de la parole comme pour l'éclosion des fleurs, des conditions favorables. La justesse ne résiderait-elle pas d'abord dans la présence de ces conditions (...) une certaine insouciance, même une certaine détente (et non pas la révolte), le silence pendant de longs jours, et surtout l'ouverture de l'être tout entier.<sup>75</sup>

This personal view was translated into action that same year: it seems to have been the central reason for Jaccottet's decision to leave Paris and city life in general. This decision coincided with his marriage - his bride, a Swiss painter, must have been attracted to the South - and with the opportunity of a small regular income from translation work. Translating has been his profession ever since, but he considered it as secondary to his creative writing, as a chance to read foreign literature in depth, to manipulate the French language, and to live in peaceful surroundings:

...das Wichtigste, damals wie heute, war mir immer  
mein eigenes dichterisches Schaffen (wie fragwürdig

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74. In Prom, p.126, Jaccottet quotes from the Art Poétique: "Le vers se sent toujours des bassesses du cœur". Ponge expresses the same idea: "Perfectionne-toi moralement et tu feras de beaux vers" (Le Parti pris des choses).

75. In Pour l'art, March-April 1953? pp.16-17.

sein Rang und Wert auch sein mochten), aber ich erkannte schon damals, dass ich es niemals als eine Tag um Tag fortsetzende Arbeit würde betreiben können und dürfen; dass es wohl immer nur die kurze, ungewisse, halb unwillkürlich hervorgebrachte Frucht der allzu seltenen inneren Sammlung und Ruhe sein würde; übrigens eher ein Zustand als eigentlich eine Arbeit.<sup>76</sup>

Of alternative professions considered, he says he thought that "l'enseignement (...) favorise le pouvoir critique aux dépens de l'invention", and that "l'édition (...) m'aurait lié fatalement à un monde littéraire que je n'aimais pas".<sup>77</sup>

Grignan proved to be a suitable environment for Jaccottet. But before considering the works he wrote there, we can say more about the writers that had influenced his thinking before 1953.

The name most frequently mentioned so far has been that of Gustave Roud. Roud was, as we have seen, an older man who recounted experiences similar to Jaccottet's. And he was a personal example of fidelity to those experiences: he pursued the insights he glimpsed with humble patience and concentration, writing with great delicacy and discretion of the tiny things that seemed to matter, and of nothing else. The integrity of this man and his work implies a doctrine of the place of poetry in the world, a doctrine which for all its austerity offers a positive hope - his typically slim volume of 1932 bore the title Essai pour un paradis.

76. In Jahrbuch der deutschen Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung 1966, p.83.

In English: "The most important thing, then as now, was always my own creative writing (however questionable its rank and value might be), but I recognized already then that I could never and should never pursue that as a continuous daily job; that it would always be only the brief, uncertain, half-involuntary fruit of an all-too-rare inner composure and calm".

77. Montaigne-Preis 1972, p.40.

One of the key passages in Roud's thought is this one from Air de la Solitude of 1945:

Je crois que seuls certains états extrêmes de l'âme et du corps (...) peuvent rendre à l'homme sa vraie puissance d'ouïe et de regard (...) Il s'agit de l'instant suprême où la communion avec le monde nous est donnée, où l'univers cesse d'être un spectacle parfaitement lisible, entièrement inane, pour devenir une immense gerbe de messages, un concert sans cesse recommencé de cris, de chants, de gestes, où tout être, toute chose est à la fois signe et porteur de signe. L'instant suprême aussi où l'homme sent crouler sa risible royauté intérieure et tremble et cède aux appels venus d'un ailleurs indubitable.

De ces messages, la poésie seule (est-il besoin de le dire?) est digne de suggérer quelque écho.<sup>78</sup>

That Jaccottet prized such passages is evident in his 1948 "Lettre à Gustave Roud", where he says:

Vous n'avez accepté de renoncer à une certaine vie que pour essayer de refaire, de ces notes perdues, cris d'alouette, regards, reflets, une mélodie ininterrompue. Votre poésie ("essai pour un paradis"), n'est justifiée que par ces appels presque imperceptibles qui tous murmurent: "Tu verras, nous ne sommes pas toujours seuls".<sup>79</sup>

Further indication of Roud's importance to Jaccottet in this period are the dedications of Requiem and of a sonnet, "La Grange",<sup>80</sup> which echoes in 1949 Roud's verse-poem "Bain d'un faucheur" of 1941; and the reviews he wrote of Roud's collected Ecrits in 1950. Here he remarks on "cette patience dans l'attente et la solitude, ce goût de la contemplation, ces mots qu'il ne lâche pas sans les avoir éprouvés", and he commends Roud's refusal of other-worldliness: "il n'y a rien d'autre, dans cette poésie, que le besoin profond, irrépress-

78. Roud, Air de la solitude, 1945. Quoted in Gustave Roud, p.141.

79. In Pour l'art, June-July 1948, p.9.

80. In La Suisse contemporaine, Jan. 1949, p.8. Roud later alludes to this in a "Lettre à Philippe Jaccottet" (Gazette de Lausanne, 4-5 June 1955, p.0) with the comment: "Il n'y a pas de recours contre la mort, sinon cette vision de l'éternel qui nous fut accordée alors, si fugitive qu'elle ait pu être". The third sonnet of L'Effraie also echoes a text of Roud, his "Bouvreuil" of 1945

Sible, de trouver dans ce monde-ci la plénitude."<sup>81</sup>

The similarities between Roud's poetic doctrine and Jaccottet's approach to his task are unmistakable. But to conclude that Roud was Jaccottet's chief source would be hasty, and ultimately wrong. Many of Roud's ideas have their origins in the writings of certain German poets, writings more complex and profound than his own, which Jaccottet could and did study. It is they, and not Roud, who are named as antecedents for Jaccottet's "expérience poétique" in the first sentence of La Promenade sous les arbres:

cette expérience n'est aucunement comparable, pour l'intensité, l'étendue, et la qualité, est-il besoin de le dire, avec celle de quelques grands poètes, Novalis, Hölderlin ou Rilke par exemple, que se penchèrent déjà sur son secret... (Prom, p.13)

Of these three, the least important to Jaccottet is Novalis. Although his name is mentioned with respect in some of the early reviews, Jaccottet says little about him, then or subsequently, except that he thought Paradise already existed on earth, in a dispersed form. Novalis indeed believed in a mysterious reality behind or beyond appearances, a divine plenitude which we may perceive in natural phenomena at moments of intense experience. And his preoccupations with the cult of light and the presence of death also resemble themes of Jaccottet. However the one quotation Jaccottet gives in La Promenade ("Le Paradis est dispersé sur toute la terre, c'est pourquoi nous ne le reconnaissons plus. Il faut réunir ses traits épars"<sup>82</sup>) is precisely Roud's favourite one,

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80. (contd) (Gustave Roud, pp.139-40).

81. In La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, Sept.29 and Oct.26, 1950.

82. Prom, p.28. Novalis expressed the same idea in Heinrich von Ofterdingen: "Le monde supérieur est plus proche de nous que nous ne le pensons ordinairement. Ici-bas déjà nous vivons en lui et nous l'apercevons, étroitement mêlé à la trame de la nature terrestre" (quoted in Béguin, L'Ame romantique et le Rêve, p.192).

and there is little other evidence that Novalis influenced him significantly.

With Hölderlin and Rilke, on the other hand, there is profound and enduring influence on Jaccottet's thought, influence of a different order from that of Roud, however important he may have been in personal terms.

The case of Rilke must be considered first. We have already seen the literary influence of his elegies on Jaccottet's Requiem. If L'Effraie and subsequent works do not echo Rilke verbally, that is because Rilke's thought and sensibility have been better assimilated, so that his meditative lyricism has become part of Jaccottet's whole style of writing. Above all Jaccottet's poetic theory, in the broad sense, owes a great debt to the manifold reflections on poetry and art contained in Rilke's verse, prose and letters. One identifiable source is Rilke's Briefe an einen jungen Dichter, which Jaccottet read at least as early as 1945.<sup>83</sup> These letters consist chiefly of advice about how a would-be poet should live, earnest and demanding advice bearing not on poetic technique but on the artist's behaviour and existence. Rilke tells his young correspondent to explore himself, to probe the sources of his own life, to experience fully his own solitude and sadness:

Erforschen Sie den Grund, der Sie schreiben heisst  
(...) bauen Sie Ihr Leben nach dieser Notwendigkeit  
(...) nähern Sie sich der Natur. Dann versuchen Sie  
zu sagen, was Sie sehen und erleben und lieben und  
verlieren.<sup>84</sup>

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83. In that year Roud's translation was published by Mermoud, and Jaccottet mentioned it in Formes et Couleurs (1945, 5).

84. Rilke, Briefe an einen jungen Dichter, Insel edition, 1929, p.8. In English: "Search for the basis of your call to write, build your life according to this necessity, make yourself close to nature. Then try to put into words the things you see and experience and love and lose".



He counsels too an openness to strange intuitions and even to disturbing experiences:

Je stiller, geduldiger und offener wir als Traurige sind, um so tiefer und um so unbeirrter geht das Neue in uns ein ...  
Wir müssen unser Dasein so weit, als es irgend geht, annehmen; alles, auch das Unerhörte, muss darin möglich sein. Das ist im Grunde der einzige Mut, den man von uns verlangt: mutig zu sein zu dem Seltsamsten, Wunderlichsten und Unaufklärbarsten, das uns begegnen kann.<sup>85</sup>

This sort of acceptance would certainly require courage and self-sacrifice, but at times it sounds an extremely passive approval of all that happens: "Lassen Sie sich das Leben geschehen. Glauben Sie mir, das Leben hat recht, auf alle Fälle".<sup>86</sup>

The virtue Rilke mentions most frequently is patience:

... Alles ist austragen und dann gebären. Jeden Eindruck und jeden Keim eines Gefühls ganz in sich, im Dunkel, im Unsagbaren, Unbewussten, dem eigenen Verstande Unerreichbaren sich vollenden lassen und mit tiefer Demut und Geduld die Stunde der Niederkunft einer neuen Klarheit abwarten: das allein heisst künstlerisch leben: im Verstehen wie im Schaffen.

Da gibt es kein Messen mit der Zeit, da gilt kein Jahr, und zehn Jahre sind nichts. Künstler sein heisst: nicht rechnen und zählen; reifen wie der Baum, der sein Säfte nicht drängt und getrost in den Stürmen des Frühlings steht ohne die Angst, dass dahinter kein Sommer kommen könnte. Er kommt doch. Aber er kommt nur zu den Geduldigen, die da sind, als ob die Ewigkeit vor ihnen läge, so sorglos still und weit. Ich lerne es täglich, lerne es unter Schmerzen, denen ich dankbar bin: Geduld ist alles!<sup>87</sup>

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85. Ibid., pp.44, 46. In English: "The more we as mourners are still, patient and open, the more deeply and easily will the new enter into us..."

"We must accept our existence as completely as possible; everything, even the unheard-of, must be possible in it. That is basically the only courage that is desired of us: to be courageous towards the most strange, wonderful and inexplicable things that can encounter us".

86. Ibid., p.52. In English: "Let life happen to you. Believe me, life is right, in all cases".

87. Ibid., p.18. These lines written in 1903 received remarkable confirmation in the gestation of the Duineser Elegien (1911-22). In English they read: "To carry and then give birth, that is everything. To let every

This passage seems to have had a deep impact on the serious young Jaccottet. His stance, his approach in L'Effraie comes close to these Rilkian requirements of openness and patience; and he even reflects at one point that beauty may be granted "peut-être à l'attente, au silence discret, / à celui qui est oublié dans les louanges / et simplement accroît son amour en secret" (P/E, p.38). It is not that such lessons could not be learnt elsewhere - Jaccottet finds a concern for interiority, for example, in Plato.<sup>88</sup> Just that Rilke was the writer from whom Jaccottet learnt most. Even Roud's mediation proved incidental in the long run. Consider for example the following words of Roud, paraphrasing Rilke:

nous sommes condamnés à la totale attente, et tout ce que nous pouvons faire, c'est de rendre cette attente aussi vaste que possible, aussi profonde; de nous ouvrir avec assez d'humilité et d'abandon à l'immédiat pour devenir sensibles aux plus légers signaux qui viendront magiquement rouvrir en nous la source close. Il ne s'agit pas, on le voit bien, d'une quête, d'une appréhension volontaire du monde extérieur. Il s'agit de se laisser faire - puis de répondre.<sup>89</sup>

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87.(contd) impression and germ of a feeling perfect itself within one, in the dark, in the unspoken, unconscious mind inaccessible to one's own comprehension, and to await with patience and deep humility the descent of a new illumination: that alone is to live as an artist, in understanding as in creating.

There is no measuring of time, a year doesn't count, and ten years are nothing. To be an artist means not measuring and counting, but ripening like the tree that doesn't force its sap and stands confident in the storms of spring without fearing that no summer will follow. It does follow. But it comes only to the patient ones who behave as if eternity lay before them, carefree and composed. I learn daily, with pain that I am thankful for, that Patience is everything!"

88. Preface to Platon, Le Banquet (1951), p.15: "l'intériorité (...) est la plus haute vertu de Socrate, et c'est celle dont l'absence entache le monde moderne". Cf Rilke: "Lassen sie nicht beirren durch die Oberflächen; in den Tiefen wird alles Gesetz" (op. cit., p.25); and Jaccottet in Pour l'art (July-Aug. 1952): "la poésie n'est-elle pas un acheminement toujours recommencé vers l'intérieur de soi".

89. Roud's notes to Rilke, Lettres à un jeune poète, 1945, pp.152-3. Jaccottet specifically commends these notes in

This passage reads very much like a reflection by Jaccottet himself, such as might be found in his notes of 1952,<sup>90</sup> or in his Journées of twenty years later. They are ideas he made his own. One might note in addition that Rilke's simile of the tree, in the long passage quoted, resembles some of Jaccottet's words about plant growth and the seasons; and that Rilke's concern that the artist accept his uncertainties, though less radically agnostic than Jaccottet's idea of "l'ignorance", is similar to it:

ich möchte Sie bitten, (...) Geduld zu haben gegen alles Ungelöste in Ihrem Herzen und zu versuchen, die Fragen selbst liebzuhaben (...) Leben Sie jetzt die Fragen. Vielleicht leben sie dann allmählich, ohne es zu merken, eines fernen Tages in die Antwort hin.<sup>91</sup>

Another concern of Rilke's stated clearly in these letters is that the essence of poetry cannot be touched by words of criticism, but that interiority should be the criterion for poet and for reader: "Ein Kunstwerk ist gut, wenn es aus Notwendigkeit entstand".<sup>92</sup> This idea is commonplace also in Jaccottet's reviews.<sup>93</sup>

There are many other passages in Rilke's writing about poetry to which analogies can be found in Jaccottet, if not direct echoes. From a late letter comes this sentence of French: "nous butinons éperdument le miel du visible, pour

89. (contd) Formes et Couleurs, 1945, 5.

90. For example: "le poète ne parle que si d'abord le monde lui souffle une parole", in Pour l'art, Nov.-Dec. 1952, p.25.

91. Rilke, op. cit. p.23. In English: "I would beg you to be patient towards all that is unresolved in your heart, and to try to like the questions themselves ... Live the questions now. Perhaps then gradually, without noticing it, you will one distant day live into the answer".

92. Ibid., p.12. Cf pp.7, 16. In English: "A work of art is good if it arose out of necessity".

93. Thus in 1952 he wishes that Elduard's poetry, which he admires for its transparency, had remained "plus purement

l'accumuler dans la grande ruche d'or de l'Invisible..."<sup>94</sup>

which resembles Jaccottet's idea of "des signes". He would agree, too, with Rilke's view that poems are not consciously invented:

da ich zugeben muss, dass Gedichte sich bilden, bin  
ich weit entfernt, sie für erfunden zu halten;  
vielmehr erscheint es mir, als ob in der Seele des  
dichterisch Ergriffen eine geistige Prädisposition  
heraustrete, die schon zwischen uns (wie ein  
unentdecktes Sternbild) gespannt war.<sup>95</sup>

Jaccottet's ethical strictures on possessiveness and triumphalism, seen in lines like these:

...seul peut entendre le coeur  
qui ne cherche la possession ni la victoire. (P/I, p.60)

have antecedents if not sources in Rilke.<sup>96</sup> And his frequent remarks about the difficulty of becoming receptive to inspiration resemble passages in Rilke's correspondence or poetry:

Aber wann, in welchem aller Leben,  
sind wir endlich offen und Empfänger?<sup>97</sup>

None of these examples gives conclusive proof of direct borrowing, such as we saw in Jaccottet's Requiem, and yet they are together too numerous to be set aside.

In summing up Rilke's influence on Jaccottet, it is

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93. (contd) intérieure" (in La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, 27 Nov. 1952).

94. Rilke, Briefe aus Muzot, Leipzig 1935, p.332.

95. Rilke, "Über den jungen Dichter", Ausgewählte Werke I, Leipzig 1936, p.287. In English: "while I must admit that poems are formed, I am far from considering them to be invented; rather it seems to me as if there emerged in the soul of the inspired poet something mentally pre-disposed which already existed expectantly among us, like an undiscovered constellation".

96. He writes in L'Entretien des Muses p.68: "Rilke a écrit un jour que notre tâche était d'apprendre non pas la possession, mais le rapport". And he certainly knew the last line of Rilke's requiem Für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth: "Wer spricht von Siegen? Überstehn ist alles". (Werke, Leipzig 1955, I, p.664).

97. Rilke: Sonette an Orpheus, II, v.

difficult to distinguish among direct echoes, accidental resemblances, common ideas, emotional affinities, and personal reinterpretations. The case is a complex one. If the term influence can include examples of one author being particularly receptive to another's work, and finding in it clarification and confirmation of ideas he was already developing, then we can say that Rilke had a strong influence on the orientation of Jaccottet's poetic vocation. The above discussion has centred on Jaccottet's writings before 1953 in order to demonstrate how many Rilkian themes were already present in them. Since then, Jaccottet has not ceased to expand his thinking about several of these themes (and his knowledge, now formidable,<sup>98</sup> of Rilke's work), so that his visible debts to the Austrian poet are merely the tips of an iceberg that would scarcely be chartable.

I have suggested that Rilke's influence is most discernible in Jaccottet's reflections about poetry. It is less discernible in his actual creative writings, which lack the breadth of vision, of narrative, of imagination that Rilke offers; but since these treat subjects that mattered to Rilke with a seriousness which Rilke would have appreciated, the question "How differently would Jaccottet have written had he not admired Rilke?" cannot be answered.

As for the influence of Hölderlin, it is more subterranean. And yet in some ways Hölderlin may be as important as Rilke: it is curious indeed that the name most frequently occurring

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98. Shown notably in his Rilke par lui-même of 1968.

in Jaccottet's survey of modern French poetry, L'Entretien des Muses, should be that of the maladjusted Swabian who died in 1843 and had no impact on French poetry until about 1930. Furthermore, on page 125 of Jaccottet's book, where he must choose names to counter Ponge's provocative claims about the greatness of Malherbe, he cites Baudelaire and Hölderlin. That was during the 1960's, however, when Jaccottet prepared the Pléiade edition of Hölderlin and wrote the essay on him for Paysages avec figures absentes.

Jaccottet first heard of Hölderlin during the war, through Gustave Roud, whose volumes of the Hellingrath edition he recalls seeing when young.<sup>99</sup> And yet he took some time to feel the full attraction of this difficult foreign poet, more time than he needed for Rilke.<sup>100</sup> Speaking to a German audience in 1966 he declared: "Bei Rilke, bei Novalis, später vor allem bei Hölderlin vernahm ich etwas wie einen Ruf, oder eine Mahnung."<sup>101</sup> His early reviews confirm this dating, since their first reference to Hölderlin is not until 1949, where he speaks of Hölderlin's "mélancolie limpide"<sup>102</sup> as having a strange poignancy, more moving than the classical style he was then advocating. The retrospective remark that: "Als ich in Paris lebte, waren mir die deutschen Dichter oft eine Hilfe gegen die allzu trockene, allzu scharfe und brillante Art, mit der meine französischen Freunde sich äusserten...",<sup>103</sup> suggests

99. Gustave Roud, p.9. In 1942 Roud translated some Poèmes de Hölderlin (Mermod, Lausanne, 1942).

100. Rilke wrote in this century, after all - his death occurred close in time and place to Jaccottet's birth - whereas Hölderlin wrote over a century before.

101. In Jahrbuch der deutschen Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, 1966, p.85. In English: "In Rilke, in Novalis, later above all in Hölderlin I perceived something resembling a call, or a warning".

102. In Pour l'art, March-April 1949, p.13.

103. Jahrbuch, loc. cit. "When I lived in Paris, the German

that Jaccottet acknowledged Hölderlin's effect on his poetic style from 1950, if not earlier. That influence may lie in the muffled, less classical moments of L'Effraie; the mysterious holes in the title-poem may be a case in point.

Hölderlin's influence thus came later than Rilke's; it also overlapped with it. If Jaccottet commended the former's "mélancolie limpide", and possibly borrowed from it in L'Effraie, it is not dissimilar to some accents of Rilke, whose elegies have a deep sense of the transience of things and of man:

...Wie er auf  
dem letzten Hügel, der ihm ganz sein Tal  
noch einmal zeigt, sich wendet, anhält, weilt -,  
so leben wir und nehmen immer Abschied.<sup>104</sup>

But in any case Rilke had been influenced by Hölderlin, and so had Roud. When Jaccottet writes of Roud's Adieu, he naturally mentions the other two poets:

comment ne pas penser à Rilke qui, opposant Hölderlin  
aux poètes installés "dans l'étroite comparaison", le  
montrait comprenant le paysage à travers les adieux  
qui, plus généralement, voyait dans l'Abschied la  
condition même de la grande tension poétique.<sup>105</sup>

One theme of Hölderlin that must have struck Jaccottet at first encounter was that of Ancient Greece. In his notes to Plato's Symposium, the work from which the name Diotima comes, Jaccottet says that Hölderlin, "mieux qu'aucun moderne, a compris profondément la Grèce antique",<sup>106</sup> an opinion he was repeating with more emphasis twenty years later (Pay, p.139). He came to view it not as a typical case of 18th-

103.(contd) poets were often a help to me against the all too dry, sharp and brilliant manner of expression of my French friends".

104. Rilke, Duineser Elegien VIII, 72-5. In 1959 Jaccottet named this poem as his favourite elegy (in NRF, March 1959, p.195).

105. Gustave Roud, p.37.

106. Notes to Platon, Le Banquet, 1951, p.108.

century Philhellenism, but as a sort of "fascination des origines" in which Hölderlin announces one whole trend of modern poetry.<sup>107</sup> So he says near the start of La Promenade sous les arbres, in recounting his own attempt to make a similar return to sources in the ancient world. That he viewed Hölderlin as more than a mere pioneer in this experience is clearly stated: "de Hölderlin en particulier (...) je tirai peut-être davantage, et il faudra que je revienne un jour sur les quelques images que ce poète incomparable m'a laissées". That sentence suggests that Jaccottet may have been most influenced by Hölderlin during the early 1950's. He was certainly reading him in 1952,<sup>108</sup> and published in 1953 a translation of part of Hyperion.<sup>109</sup> His "observations" in Pour l'art quote fragments that have particularly struck him from the poems "Die Meinigen" and "Der Abschied"<sup>110</sup>: moments when Hölderlin writes out of an intense contact with some visible thing. The first one tells how Hölderlin was stupefied just by the sight of a river, prompting the remark: "ce qu'il voit alors, il le voit avec une intensité inouïe".<sup>111</sup> This later seemed to Jaccottet one of the keys to Hölderlin's work: "le fleuve n'est pas le symbole de l'illimité, mais son porteur, son signe; l'illimité est dans le fleuve comme Jupiter dans le taureau...".<sup>112</sup>

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107. Prom, p.17. Cf L'Entretien des Muses, p.305.

108. Re-reading, according to a note in La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, 2 Sept. 1952.

109. In Pour l'art, May-June 1953.

110. In Pour l'art, Nov.-Dec. 1952, pp.24-5, Jan.-Feb. 1953, pp.5-6.

111. In Pour l'art, Nov.-Dec. 1952, p.25.

112. In NRF, Feb. 1967, p.222.



Jaccottet thus found in Hölderlin something very like his own discoveries of poetic "signes"; and at the same time recognised the unique relationship in Hölderlin's poetry between these personal experiences of reality and a nostalgia for ancient Greece.

Mention has already been made of Jaccottet's study of Greek literature under André Bonnard. There is no doubt that Hölderlin reinforced his belief in its continuing importance: "Nous sommes de ceux pour qui L'Odyssée n'a d'existence que dans la mesure où elle pénètre encore au plus profond de nous".<sup>113</sup> Jaccottet had found in reading the Greeks a beauty, a purity, a grandeur, a sublimity. Hölderlin had from the same experience gone on to consider his own time in contrast to that of the ancients, to reflect that the world once was hallowed by the presence of the gods and is no longer:

Aber Freund! wir kommen zu spät. Zwar leben die Götter, aber über dem Haupt droben in anderer Welt.<sup>114</sup>

This interpretation of history fitted very well with Jaccottet's own feelings about the emptiness of modern age. It seemed to him, then, that Hölderlin's insight was of central importance:

Hölderlin, non par une vue de l'esprit, mais par une expérience intime, a compris que l'homme d'Occident, à mesure qu'il accroissait son savoir, accroissait son isolement.

Hölderlin thus provided an idea of history that was at the same time a powerful elegiac theme:

Zu lang, zu lang schon ist

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113. Preface to Homère, L'Odyssée, Lausanne 1955.

114. Hölderlin, "Brot und Wein". This was quoted by Roud in his note to Rilke's Lettres à un jeune poète, Lausanne, 1945.

die Ehre des Himmlischen unsichtbar.<sup>116</sup>

He provided too an interpretation for the poet's plight in the modern age. A 1949 article by Jaccottet views the contemporary world as a scandal and sees poetry as the contrary to it: "étant concrète, passionnément attachée aux choses, aux corps, à l'individu; étant intérieure, quand tout aujourd'hui tend à l'extériorité; étant secrète et sacrée dans un temps d'exhibition et de profanation".<sup>117</sup>

When he tackles this problem in La Promenade sous les arbres, he quotes at length Hölderlin's statement of "le souci profond du poète moderne", a sense of separation from the springs of sacred fire:

...was zu tun indes und zu sagen,  
Weiss ich nicht, und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?  
Aber sie sind, sagst du, wie des Weingotts Heilige  
Preister,<sup>118</sup>  
Welche von Land zu Land zogen in heiliger Nacht.

The above discussion has given some of the reasons why Jaccottet cultivated Hölderlin, some areas of possible influence. He seems to have been impressed less at first by Hölderlin's sense of reality than by his sense of the sacred, his dream of a "Friedensfeier" or new hallowing. Recently he identified Hölderlin's fundamental theme as "celui de l'unité, de l'Harmonie ou Plénitude suprême, hors de laquelle il n'est pas de vraie vie".<sup>119</sup> In the 1950's he spoke of Hölderlin as more an example than a close influ-

116. Hölderlin, "Patmos" (1802 version).

117. "La crise de la poésie" in La Suisse contemporaine, Dec. 1949 pp.670-1.

118. Hölderlin, "Brot und Wein". Quoted (in Roud's translation) in Prom, p.107. Cf Pay, pp.141-2.

119. Preface to Hölderlin's Hypérion, 1973, p.12.

ence:

même l'expérience d'un Hölderlin ne pouvait que me demeurer en quelque façon étrangère, extérieure, je devais la laisser simplement présente à l'horizon avec quelques autres qui m'avaient plus particulièrement touché et instruit. (Prom, p.18)

This is partly because he felt that the contemporary world was even more disunited than that of Hölderlin, for whom "les signes (...) demeurent liés à quelque chose, même si ce quelque chose est la ruine, le temps destructeur".<sup>120</sup>

But Hölderlin is a poet one can journey a long way with, making new discoveries and learning new lessons. Jaccottet took him as a companion, and valued his whole oeuvre without neglecting or favouring the obscure and fragmentary parts of it: he considered him not, as some have done, as a psychological case of poetic madness, but as a major author, a poet of love and fervour whose works offer brilliant lights and painful shadows. Gradually Jaccottet appreciated the full power of Hölderlin's vision of simple, concrete things, of his this-worldliness, until he could define Hölderlin's peculiar tension in these terms: "Dans cette oeuvre, il semble que jamais le monde n'ait été plus insaisissable, et jamais plus proche".<sup>121</sup> That sentence echoes these lines of Hölderlin, which themselves state a major theme of Jaccottet's own writings:

Nah ist  
Und schwer zu fassen, der Gott.<sup>122</sup>

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120. In NRF Oct. 1958 p.742.

121. In NRF, July 1961, p.129.

122. Hölderlin, "Patmos" (1802 version). Jaccottet actually quotes these two lines in NRF Feb. 1967, p.223 and in Pay, p.147.

## THE VISIBLE AND THE MYSTERIOUS

Grignan is a town of about 1000 inhabitants situated 15km east of the Rhône near the southern limit of the Drôme département. "Je ne sais pas très bien ce qu'il en est des frontières administratives", writes Jaccottet in La Promenade sous les arbres (p.49), "mais je devine qu'ici la Provence commence dans les sols". About 50km to the south lies Avignon, and the "Enclave des Papes" begins only 2km away. Historically, the Grignan region has belonged at times to the Dauphiné and at times to the Comté de Provence or the Comtat Venaissin. And geographically too it is an ambiguous area, sloping gradually between the hills of the Drôme and the plain of the Vaucluse:

le terrain est inégal; ce n'est ni un plateau, ni une vallée, mais une confusion de dépressions et de collines, et, dans ces creux, le Dauphiné s'achève. Des rivières basses ou des ruisseaux toujours clairs coulent entre des rives d'herbe abondante.  
... (Prom, pp.49-50)

The nearest rivers are Le Lez and La Berre; Grignan itself is built on a butte between them, surmounted by the Renaissance château where Madame de Sévigné died, "la dame qui fait notre réputation au loin et survit dans l'enseigne des cafés".<sup>1</sup> The town is just high enough above the surrounding countryside to enjoy a panoramic view over the fields and hamlets to its horizon of hills, of which the dominant one is the Mont Ventoux (1900 m) to the south-east.<sup>2</sup>

1. Prom, p.48. Jaccottet does not discuss her further - yet it is not altogether inappropriate that he should live beside the tomb of a 17th-century stylist.

2. In the first edition of La Promenade sous les arbres (Lausanne, 1957, pp.60-1), a two-page sketch by Jaccottet's wife shows an outline of some of these hills, the Montagne de la Lance.

Such are the facts about the place; but is it beautiful, is it of a kind to inspire lyricism? Madame de Sévigné, a writer not insensitive to nature, hardly found it so. Her comments about the landscape are sparse: "nos montagnes sont charmantes dans leur excès d'horreur (...) nous avons cent fois plus de froid ici qu'à Paris".<sup>3</sup> The charm of the region more often relies on the diversity of its vegetation, which itself varies from the lush green of spring to the red-brown of autumn. But this unspectacular, understated beauty was for some reason "right" for Jaccottet, it somehow matched his sensibility.

He recalls his first encounters with it in these terms:

je fus saisi, plus violemment et plus continûment surtout qu'autrefois, par le monde extérieur. Je ne pouvais plus détacher mes yeux de cette demeure mouvante, changeante, et je trouvais dans sa considération une joie et une stupeur croissantes; je puis vraiment parler de splendeur, bien qu'il se soit toujours agi de paysages très simples, dépourvus de pittoresque, de lieux plutôt pauvres et d'espaces mesurés. Or, cette splendeur m'apparaissait de plus en plus lumineuse, aérée, et en même temps de moins en moins compréhensible. De nouveau, ce mystère nourricier, ce mystère réjouissant me poussait comme d'une poigne très vigoureuse vers la poésie... (Prom, pp.18-19)

One of the points made here, the region's lack of obvious attractions, is repeated later: "rien de particulièrement majestueux comme la mer ou les montagnes, ni éclat ni harmonie, ni sérénité exceptionnels".<sup>4</sup> An easily definable splendour would not have held the same fascination: "à peine avais-je vu ces paysages, je les ai sentis m'attirer comme ce qui se

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3. Mme de Sévigné, letter to Coulanges, February 3, 1695. At Grignan, of course, she was staying with her daughter, and so wrote no long letters to her.

4. Pay, p.23. After his travels through Austria, Jaccottet was to comment thus on a statistical list of tourist overnights: "elle fait de moi, apparemment, l'anti-touriste par excellence, puisque mon admiration pour les paysages autrichiens semble avoir crû en proportion exactement inverse de l'afflux des visiteurs" (Autriche,

dérobe" (Pay, p.21). He sensed indeed something special or sacred which related closely to his poetic questioning - he wrote after ten years' residence:

Maintenant encore (et pourtant les années auraient dû m'user), il m'arrive de retrouver aussi intense le sentiment qui me vint au commencement, et qui se traduisit en moi par le mot: "paradis". Traduction parfaitement absurde à beaucoup d'égards, mais que je dois essayer de comprendre, puisqu'elle est liée au secret poursuivi".<sup>5</sup>

We cannot say that Jaccottet brought to the Grignan region a peasant's love for the soil. But he did bring a classicist's feeling for the Mediterranean world; and the place certainly gave him a sense of antiquity.<sup>6</sup> And above all he brought a poet's sensitivity to light and space; and he found at once openness and limits, "j'aime cet espace que les montagnes définissent mais n'emprisonnent pas" (Prom, p.63), a place of hills and combes, of trees and birds, of luminous dawns and dusks. At first an exciting discovery, Grignan came to be a valued constant in his life. La Semaïson and Journées show how much it has become part of him and he of it. His various stays, over the last 25 years, in Lausanne, Paris or the Perche, and his trips further afield to Spain, Italy, Austria, Germany, Holland and England, have not threatened to displace Grignan as the home where he belongs: indeed he has shown towards it the degree of devotion that sentimental poets reserve for their place of birth.

This introduction does not mean to imply, however, that

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4.(contd) p.175).

5. Pay, pp.22-23, in the text first published as Paysages de Grignan, 1964.

6. It is above all in Paysages that he speaks of its "Greekness", for example (p.25) of the Val des Nymphes, 12km away near the village of La Garde-Adhémar, a combe with a spring where a temple was once raised to honour the nymphs - see Sem, p.104 (May 1966), Pay, p.122.

in 1953 Jaccottet suddenly turned into a poet of landscape. His phrase quoted above, "plus violemment et plus continûment surtout qu'autrefois", sounds all the stronger if we realise that he had always written about nature, from his earliest poems.<sup>7</sup> He had responded to elements of nature in the poetry he read, in the works, say, of Roud and of Jammes; and included natural scenes, if not full landscapes, in Requiem, where they offered a symbolic source of strength. In L'Effraie, as we have seen, particular places in Italy or near Paris are described more simply, with less of an ornamental, "literary" tone than before, though the poet still sounds like a visitor, a city-dweller, a tourist:

... Je n'ai rien inventé:  
voici le chien qui dort, les oiseaux rassemblés,  
les ouvriers courbés devant les saules frêles  
brûlant comme des feux; la servante les hèle  
au bout de la journée... (P/E, p.36)

The importance of nature is greatest in poems like "La Semaïson", "Les Eaux et les forêts" and "Au petit jour".<sup>8</sup> And these can be seen as precursors of those written later at Grignan. Jaccottet's change of address ensured that they would have sequels, and that his poetic development would follow from them.

It remains a gradual development. If the region "seized him" suddenly, as he reports, it did not immediately make a mark on his poetic style and thought. Indeed its impact cannot be measured fully until the appearance of La Semaïson

7. E.g. these lines from "Elégie" in La Suisse contemporaine, Aug. 1944, p.685:

Aux lèvres de la nuit s'abandonne le monde!  
Le ciel s'est dédoré sur la basse maison  
Et, sous les arbres fins grillageant l'horizon,  
Un chat de cendre enchante l'heure de sa ronde...

Admittedly, "Pour les Ombres" and Trois poèmes aux démons are more concerned with inner experiences than with the outside world.

8. P/E, pp.39 ff, 45 ff; P/I, pp.56 ff. So also "Nouvelles

ten years later. By then we know that the semi-accidental choice of Grignan opened a new chapter in his career.

The first poems Jaccottet wrote at Grignan are found in the central section of L'Ignorant, entitled "Paroles dans l'air". Written between 1953 and 1955 or 1956, these are not markedly discontinuous with the poems of "Dans les rues d'une ville" (1950-52). The section opens with "Le Travail du poète", a clear definition of Jaccottet's stance and undertaking:

L'ouvrage d'un regard d'heure en heure affaibli  
n'est pas plus de rêver que de former des pleurs,  
mais de veiller comme un berger et d'appeler  
tout ce qui risque de se perdre s'il s'endort. (P/I, p.64)

We can interpret the rejection of dreams and tears as Jaccottet's wish to stand apart from two paths of modern literature, both the escapist literature of myth and dream which cannot be true because it ignores the reality of death, and the nihilist literature of anguish and lament which ignores everything but death. Jaccottet must make a special effort to resist this temptation to despair, as he says presently:

Moins nos larmes apparaîtront brouillant nos yeux  
et nos personnes par la crainte garrottées,  
plus les regards iront s'éclaircissant et mieux  
les égarés verront les portes enterrées. (P/I, p.76)

His chosen alternative to weeping is called "veiller", vigilance, which may seem an unpromising passion to cultivate, but which nevertheless can be a productive one - and indeed Jaccottet's best work testifies to a high level of attentive-

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8.(contd) notes pour la Semailson" (P/I, p.52) and "Notes pour le petit jour" (P/I, pp.53 ff).



ness, passive yet concentrated, a tenacious lucidity.<sup>9</sup>

According to "Le Travail du poète", he feels that any more active stance is denied him by doubt and weakness and mortality, he is "l'appauvri", ill-equipped for circumstances that are unpropitious, capable only of modest, patient endeavour:

comme un homme à genoux qu'on verrait s'efforcer  
contre le vent de rassembler son maigre feu... (P/I, p.65)

This vigilance is, in more confident moments, called "prière" or "adoration"; and even here Jaccottet thinks it can be rewarded, directed as it is towards fragile things, at once fleeting and shimmering, which seem to suggest the survival of the past: "voix ou lueurs/ (nul ne le sait), liant les défunts à l'enfance..."<sup>10</sup> In sensing such things one can experience a bitter-sweet exaltation.

The succeeding poems develop these themes, with a surer touch than the earlier ones. The sense of transitoriness is as strong as ever: we are "âmes de peu de durée" (P/I, p.67), or "corps provisoires, en ces rencontres périssables" (P/I, p.85). L.-G. Gros rightly affirms in his review that "toutes ces variations n'ont d'autre thème que (...) le sentiment de la fuite du temps et l'appréhension de la mort".<sup>11</sup> But

9. In this vigilance there is little sense of "watching over" anybody, as if the poet were a priest or guardian, though there is a suggestion that his insights may assist others, "les égarés". A good definition of "veiller" is "vivre la vie de tous les hommes, avec les yeux bien ouverts; regarder intensément le monde" (Prom, p.132). Jaccottet's rejection of "pleurer" and "rêver" is explained more fully in 1970: "sans doute cela vaut-il mieux que de persuader l'homme que sa misère est sans issue ou de l'en détourner pour ne faire miroiter à ses yeux que de l'ir-réel, deux tentations contraires, également dangereuses entre lesquelles oscillent les journaux et beaucoup de livres actuels" (Prière d'insérer of Paysages avec figures absentes).

10. P/I, p.64. The image of the dead lady reappears in Prom, p.56.

11. In Cahiers du Sud, June 1958, p.445.

images of hope are also numerous - from the daybreak scene of "L'Inattendu", of which we are told: "là se révèle ce que nul n'espérait plus" (P/I, p.70), to the ending of "Le Laveur de vaisselle":

qu'au moins je voie monter la lumière sur son plateau,  
tel un désordre éblouissant de verrerie et d'or...<sup>12</sup>

Jaccottet's favourite images of light now tend to be associated with a rural setting of grass, trees, open space and mountains. In the fourth poem of the section Jaccottet expresses a wish to adopt the voices of nature, or to hand over to them: "vous n'entendrez plus que le bruit de la rivière/ qui coule derrière la forêt..." (P/I, p.69). Particular places are not named, but it is easy to imagine a Provençal setting for poems like "Les Gitans", "Promenade à la fin de l'été" and "L'Amandier en hiver..." (P/I, pp.67, 85, 92), or for lines like: "entre lavande et vigne filent aussi des messages" (P/I, p.77). We know, however, from the prose of La Promenade sous les arbres (completed in 1956), that the chief scene in Jaccottet's mind is Grignan. We can be sure that the lines:

M'étant penché cette nuit à la fenêtre,  
je vis que le monde était devenu léger... (P/I, p.71)

belong to Grignan, and to a particular time or times, since one chapter of La Promenade discusses the same experience under the same title, "Sous les pas de la lune". There is no doubt that other poems were prompted by the view from that window and the fascination it offered:

Les arbres sont en bas, l'herbe plus bas, le monde vert,  
scintillant le matin et, quand vient la nuit, s'éteignant,  
et les montagnes qui respirent dans l'éloignement  
sont si minces que le regard errant passe au travers.<sup>13</sup>

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12. L'Ignorant, p.69.

13. P/I, p.75. Cf. Prom, p.64.

A note written in 1958<sup>14</sup> reveals that images of light on foliage in "Le Livre des morts" were attempts to express what the poet saw from his garden in the evenings. Similarly, the poem "Le Passage des troupeaux"<sup>15</sup> evokes the flocks that camp beside Grignan in November, discussed more prosaically in La Promenade (p.62). We can consider therefore that this phrase of La Promenade: "par la fenêtre je vois en ce moment précis" (p.48) is frequently implicit in the poems, and that his lyrical images of light relate now to his observation of "la lumière de Grignan".

A clear description of the place would not, however, have suited Jaccottet's intentions in L'Ignorant. He writes about nature not out of concern with the world of forms and light as such, but in an endeavour to penetrate the poetic reality he senses behind it, "les énigmes que nous propose le monde extérieur" (Prom, p.93). The Grignan region proved fertile in those "signes de l'illimité" which he sought; but he was interested, as Gros puts it, "moins à la splendeur de la création qu'à des détails susceptibles de faire entendre de chacun un certain message".<sup>16</sup> These poems of 1953-56 identify that message as a hope beyond death, a hope that death might mean not darkness but greater light:

Puis vient enfin ce qui pourrait vaincre notre détresse,  
l'air plus léger que l'air et sur les cimes la lumière.  
(P/I, p.86)

...la mort, prochaine ou vague selon son désir,  
soit l'aliment de la lumière inépuisable. (P/I, p.76)

An even more precise affirmation, "la lumière de la terre a

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14. In NRF, June 1958, p.1124.

15. L'Ignorant, pp.52-3.

16. In Cahiers du Sud, June 1958, p.446. This is much less true of Jaccottet's subsequent writings, despite Clerval's insistence on the same point (pp.7-8).

un sens qui échappe à la mort", occurs at one point. It is hidden, however, behind a subjunctive in a passage of indirect speech - the air tells us that a man who once sang and loved the world used to say:

...que la lumière de la terre  
 était trop pure pour ne pas avoir un sens  
 qui échappât de quelque manière à la mort... (P/I, p.72)

This fictional man, presumably dead, can be taken as a projection of the poet himself. What could have been a proud religious belief is advanced as a tentative inspiration, tempered by agnosticism. And the poem containing these lines, is called "Paroles dans l'air", an ambiguous title applied also to the whole group of twenty poems, asking whether these words will fly out happily into free open space, or whether they will be lost immediately in the void, like these later words from La Promenade:

Paroles prononcées en l'air, sur les conseils de la lune, et que bientôt viendront disperser pluies de sang, cris de coqs égorgés comme des porcs et affolement de spectres au petit jour. (Prom, p.83)

All utterances are precarious.

Diffidence and reticence often veil Jaccottet's picture of death also, but sometimes the threat of nothingness is conveyed in stronger, more horrific images: he addresses the "sombre ennemi qui nous combats et nous resserres" (P/I, p.76); he evokes "l'atrocité qui gagne";<sup>17</sup> or he portrays allegorical horsemen confronting "l'immense, blanc et lent malheur", "le pesant monstre" and "le souffle de l'immonde groin" - the poem in question "Dans un tourbillon de neige" (P/I, p.79), has an apocalyptic tone. And these images are consistently placed in opposition to the frequent images of

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17. L'Ignorant, p.56.

brightness, lightness and hope, which they are said to outweigh. The horsemen's defences are meagre; the struggle is unequal; "Je ne fais pas grand-chose contre le démon" (P/I, p.70).

These oppositions show better than ever the dualistic structure of Jaccottet's thinking, and support his remarks already quoted about the image of the scales: "J'ai toujours eu dans l'esprit, sans bien m'en rendre compte, une sorte de balance. Sur un plateau il y avait la douleur, la mort, sur l'autre la beauté de la vie".<sup>18</sup> This idea is explicit also in La Promenade: "...leur beauté me semblait comparable à la mort, capable de la contrebalancer".<sup>19</sup> The poems of L'Ignorant express moments when Jaccottet indeed thought that the counterbalancing succeeded, and other moments when it seemed quite futile - as he puts it:

...il arrive aussi que soit suspecte la balance  
et quand je penche, j'entrevois le sol de sang taché.  
(P/I, p.74)

or again:

Autant se protéger du tonnerre avec deux roseaux,  
quand l'ordre des étoiles se délabre sur les eaux...<sup>20</sup>

This sense of futility is not uncommon in his writings. Far from suppressing it, he lets it accompany his hopes and researches, by deliberate policy:

Si ce que j'ai cru comprendre des sources de la beauté  
n'est pas illusoire, il faudrait, non point que nous  
acceptions la contradiction qui règne sur notre vie,  
mais que nous entrions en elle, que nous nous portions

18. A travers un verger, p.25. Quoted at greater length in chapter one.

19. Prom, p.111. Cf. ibid., p.52: "opposer à ce qu'il y a de plus lourd et de plus démesuré ce qui se fait de plus frêle et de moins visible, à l'énorme avalanche le mouvement d'une nymphe, à la tonitruante épouvante la fuite de l'eau entre les joncs".

20. P/I, p.78. Jaccottet quoted those two lines in 1972

à son extrême point, c'est-à-dire que nous vivions en adorant la beauté d'autant plus ardemment qu'elle est plus fragile, en ce lieu où il y a le plus de joie parce qu'il y a aussi le plus de menaces".

(Prom, p.130)

This feeling gives the poems of L'Ignorant a constant tension which is one of their most notable virtues. L.-G. Gros drew attention to it in these words: "L'originalité du lyrisme de Jaccottet réside sans doute dans cette impression qu'il donne d'un équilibre menacé".<sup>21</sup>

Just as natural beauty provides possible reasons for not despairing, so does love. In L'Ignorant, love is treated even more discreetly than in L'Effraie. It is a less anxious, more serene theme; and it is more completely integrated with the other themes by its association with the mysteries of life and death. Thus two images of the "fragilité extrême", the "chose insaisissable" which the poet pursues are:

cette parole dite dans un souffle à la bouche qui attend  
et cette brume une seule seconde sur l'astre des yeux<sup>22</sup>  
brûlants...

And the poem, "Le Secret", also early in the collection, gives this double message: "même à qui chemine à mon côté (...) je ne dirais ce qu'on devine/ dans l'amoureuse nuit" (P/I, p.58), affirming that love helps to reveal the secret which the poet nevertheless does not divulge. A later poem is equally secretive: "que reste caché ce qui fait notre compagnie (...) innommable est la source de nos gestes" (P/I, p.83). In addition to Jaccottet's typical discretion, there were perhaps special reasons at this time for protecting something

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20. (contd) (Montaigne-Preis 1972, p.44) with the comment: "j'ai essayé d'exprimer la dérision de ce combat dans un poème justement intitulé 'Le Combat inégal' qui s'achève ainsi". The image of cosmic catastrophe reappears in La Promenade (p.51): "j'ai vu en rêve des cataclysmes: les astres qui se décrochent..."

21. In Cahiers du Sud, June 1958, p.445.

22. L'Ignorant, p.17.

precious: we may recall that 1953 was the year of his marriage to the woman to whom L'Ignorant is dedicated, a marriage which has proved fruitful and enduring. The poems written between 1953 and 1956 include a few lines of passion: "Cris de femme, feux de l'amour dans le lit sombre" (P/I, p.77), and also this evocation of conjugal happiness:

...l'amour  
dans la maison fermée s'accroît, tourne et travaille,  
serviteur des soucieux portant une lampe à la main.  
(P/I, p.84)

And in the sequence "Le Livre des morts", memories of love are counted as important to old age, and the three offerings fit for the deceased include:

...un seul mot prononcé par celle  
qui fut pour lui le souffle, le bois tendre et l'étincel-  
le. (P/I, p.90)

These references to love remain infrequent in the poems, but they have a significance out of proportion with their number, judging by this remark Jaccottet made in 1956:

ces moments privilégiés (...) où ce que j'appelle la  
réalité réelle nous fait signe (...), l'amour, en  
particulier les multiplie (mais si l'on essayait,  
sur ce point, de garder un peu de réserve?)

or this sentence of 1958:

nous nous souviendrons des premiers jours, des premières  
nuits où nous fûmes ensemble; de la grâce de notre  
insouciance, de ce bonheur sans plus de poids que  
l'ombre, de ces quelques instants où il n'y eut plus ni  
mouvement, ni distance...<sup>24</sup>

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23. In Domaine Suisse, Lausanne, Oct.-Nov. 1956, p.67. The master in L'Obscurité has this same reserve: "Lui ne me parlait jamais de sa compagne au cours de nos entretiens; il était plus discret à son endroit qu'à l'endroit de son premier amour. Une fois simplement il m'a dit: 'A qui croyez-vous que je doive ce coeur neuf, que la vue d'un brin d'herbe soulève de joie?'" (p.137). For his own part, Jaccottet writes in the same period: "Belle ennemie, vrai ange gardien, poursuis ta guerre contre ce qu'il y a en moi de pire, la lourdeur, le sérieux, le froid" (El, p.160).

24. El, pp.90-91 (first published in NRF, Sept. 1958).

We have seen that such momentary experiences of a mysterious plenitude are thought to be possible counterweights to suffering and death. Another image similar in importance to that of the scales is the image of an unexpected opening or passage. Here Jaccottet thinks of death not as a heavy weight, but as a solid obstacle blocking his path, a limit. The frightening sense of finality it gives can be averted by the imagined opening of door, whereby one might cross the threshold and pass into a mysterious beyond.<sup>25</sup> Such a dream lies behind various lines of L'Ignorant, such as "L'Aveu dans l'obscurité":

Une porte a peut-être été poussée en ces parages,  
une étendue offerte en silence à notre séjour (...)

pousse avec moi cette légère et coupante cloison,  
vois comme nous passons sans peiner dans l'obscur empire.  
(P/I, 82-83)

or "Sur les pas de la lune":

...il n'y avait plus d'obstacles. Tout ce qui  
nous retient dans le jour semblait plutôt devoir  
me porter maintenant d'une ouverture à l'autre (...)

j'allais entrer dans l'herbe sans aucune peur... (P/I, 71)

Elucidation of these last lines is offered in the prose texts of La Promenade:

Les choses n'avaient plus de corps; ou du moins, ce qui s'attache pour nous à la pensée du corps, moiteur, fatigue, poids, caducité, corruption, elles en étaient délivrées, véritables oiseaux (...) Une terre plus libre, plus transparente, plus paisible que la terre (...) le pays des morts sans doute teinté de noir mais quand même sans horreur (...) J'allais poser le pied dans l'herbe, n'ayant plus peur, prêt à tous les changements, altérations et métamorphoses qui pourrait m'advenir.<sup>26</sup>

25. A travers un verger (1975) mentions this image also, this "désir profond, craintif, de passer sans peine un seuil, d'être emporté dans la mort comme par une magicienne". (pp.24-5)

26. Prom, pp.72-73. Clerval (p.53) gives a good discussion of this imagery. See also Prom, p.80: "Cette nuit (...) semblait dire au corps: un seul geste, et tu n'auras plus de poids, plus de peines; avance encore, monte encore, adore encore, et ce qui t'effraie se résorbera en



Behind this repeated image of passage lies, therefore, the idea of a possible victory over death, seldom better expressed than in these lines from "Lettre du vingt-six juin":

...Quand nous serons défaits de toute crainte,  
quand la mort ne sera pour nous que transparence,  
quand elle sera claire comme l'air des nuits d'été  
et quand nous volerons portés par la légèreté  
à travers tous ces illusoires murs que le vent pousse  
(P/I, pp.68-9)

This lyricism is inspired by a vision of hope, hope for a sort of happy death where the individual's inevitable end would be a painless absorption into a luminous vastness. In the poem "Paroles dans l'air", it is imagined to have happened already to the projected self who "s'est changé dans cette ombre qui lui plaisait" (P/I, p.72). There are frequent expressions of the same hope in La Promenade:

...tout au fond de moi il y avait un désir de ne rien rompre, mais seulement de changer imperceptiblement pour finalement me confondre avec l'air.<sup>27</sup>

And it is also of central importance to the final section of L'Ignorant, "Le Livre des morts", written in the autumn of 1956.

More than any other part of L'Ignorant, "Le Livre des morts" reflects a literary interest Jaccottet had in the first part of the 1950's, a reading of "les sources temporelles de la poésie" (Prom, p.16) - Assurian rituals, Babylonian epics, and Egyptian poems and tales. These texts (and some early

26. (contd) fumées; fais-toi de plus en plus fin, de plus en plus aigu et pur, et tu ne craindras point les plus douloureux, les plus extraordinaires changements".

27. Prom, p.118. Specific references to "passage" occur on pp.36, 43 and 132. The narrator in L'Obscurité imagined that the master could die "dans une sérénité absolue (comme quelqu'un qui ne cesse d'espérer un accroissement encore de lumière)" (p.90). This is related to Rilke's idea of death as deliverance and self-transcendence

sculptures, such as Sumerian or Cycladic statues) filled him with "la nostalgie du sacré",<sup>28</sup> since they seemed to show man's former proximity to mysterious truths.<sup>29</sup> Whereas Jaccottet felt, as Hölderlin had done, that modern poets have lost touch with the inner springs of life and strength, these works gave the impression that "le poète était alors au coeur même de cette plénitude" (Prom, p.107). One reason for this was the tone of their language: Jaccottet was particularly impressed by the gravity of the ancient Egyptian mortuary texts, by what he later called their "haute solennité".<sup>30</sup>

The specific work from which his "Livre des morts" takes its title is the Kitab al-Mayyitun, a collection of texts composed by ancient Egyptian scribes for the benefit of the dead - spells, incantations, hymns, prayers, litanies, magical names and formulae.<sup>31</sup> Thus Jaccottet's collection of agnostic poems ends by alluding to a past civilization's confident belief in life after death. And the poet in this sequence does indeed assume some of the ambition of the scribes, who concluded each chapter of papyrus with rubrics such as these:

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27.(contd) which Jaccottet calls "une mort qui ne soit pas autre chose que l'épanouissement de la vie, plutôt que sa rupture ou son effondrement" (Rilke par lui-même, p.74).

28. Prom, p.145. Cf. pp.17, 137 and Sem, p.103 (May 1966).

29. The fullest discussion of these is in L'Obscurité, pp.93-96, which says that these expressions of ancient religious beliefs had seized "la limite de l'homme ou si l'on préfère, l'au-delà de sa limite, l'en dehors absolu, conçu tantôt comme effrayant, tantôt comme adorable, ou les deux ensemble (...) le pressentiment de quelque chose d'essentiel qui n'était autre que notre rapport, notre lien avec ce qui ne se peut lier" (Obs, pp.94-5).

30. Gustave Roud, p.97.

31. In Pour l'art, Lausanne, May-June 1952, Jaccottet had referred both to this Egyptian collection and to the Tibetan Book of the Dead, which likewise gives directions for the soul of the deceased. We may note also that Rilke

He who knows this book on earth, or on whose coffin it has been written, may come forth on any day he pleases, and again after his dwelling...his homestead shall be among the fields of the Field of Reeds...and he shall flourish there even as he flourished on earth.

If this chapter be known by the deceased, he shall come forth pure by day after his death...He shall see the Disk of the Sun, he shall be in good case upon earth before Rā, and his word shall be truth in the sight of Osiris, and no evil thing whatsoever shall have dominion over him for ever and ever.<sup>32</sup>

The purpose of the Egyptian texts was thus to guide the man after death, so that his soul could pass through the ordeal of judgement and on to the delights of the well-watered pastures where he would become a new and eternal being. Hence there are prayers such as this one, designed for recitation on the day of the funeral:

Hail, O ye who open up the way, who act as guides to the roads in the Other World to perfect souls in the House of Osiris, open ye up for him the way...May he enter the House of Osiris with boldness, and may he come forth therefrom in peace.

or this repeated petition, in a litany to the sun-gods:

O grant thou me a path wherever I may pass in peace...<sup>33</sup>

The above quotations show the importance in the Egyptian texts of the idea of passage, which already had a major place in Jaccottet's preoccupations. And indeed a few lines from his "Livre des morts" could be read as verbal allusions:

Qu'il entre maintenant vêtu de sa seule impatience  
dans cet espace enfin à la mesure de son coeur...  
(P/I, p.88)

Passe, âme passagère... (P/I, p.89).

31. (contd) associates the Lament-land of his tenth elegy with the Egyptian cult of the dead.

32. The Book of the Dead (The Papyrus of Ani, c 1400 B.C.) ed. Sir Wallis Budge, New York, 1960, pp.365 and 553.

33. Ibid., pp.361 and 491.

The parallels cannot be taken too far, however. It is not Jaccottet's intention to pastiche the scribal texts, or even to compose words for people already dead. He is inspired not by firm conviction but by a weak and doubting wish to hope; and his words are for live mortals, particularly those of the threshold of death - his opening line, "Celui qui est entré dans les propriétés de l'âge" (P/I, p.87), read in an earlier version: "il n'est plus temps pour celui qui atteint à la vieillesse".<sup>34</sup>

Jaccottet's intentions can be gauged more fully from the speech he gave in 1956.<sup>35</sup> In it he describes a poetic language "naturel aux hommes dès les origines", yet denser and more profound than ordinary language, which can help allay the fear of death. And he concludes with the image of a Chinese artist wishing to hand to a dying neighbour a painted page "comme un débris d'un nouveau Livre des Morts", to help him pass "sans peur ni regrets le seuil du très sombre espace qui l'attend pour l'engloutir ou le changer". It was this underlying ambition, albeit tentative, that prompted one reviewer to speak of "cette ignorance dont l'humilité rejoint, en fait, un orgueil quasi surhumain".<sup>36</sup> Jaccottet was to recall it with irony ten years later on the first page of Leçons:

J'ai prétendu guider mourants et morts.<sup>37</sup>

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34. In NRF, June 1957, pp.1005-8.

35. In Domaine Suisse, Lausanne, Oct.-Nov. 1956, pp.68-69. This speech was delivered on June 29 of that year. A passage in L'Obscurité develops his discussion of the power of language in ancient times (Obs, pp.65-66), speaking of "des mots choisis et arrangés de telle façon qu'ils prêtent une mesure à ce vide..." and quoting a Greco-Roman example.

36. G.-E. Clancier in Mercure de France, July 1958, p.503.

37. P/L, p.160. Or later still: "J'ai cru, j'ai voulu

The sequence, "Le Livre des morts", comprises seven poems of up to 28 lines in length, which are themselves often divided into groups of 4-6 lines. The first evokes the weakness of an old man, his sense of loss:

Je le regarde qui regarde s'éloigner  
tout ce qui fut un jour son seul travail, son deux  
désir... (P/I, p.87)

and then prays to the unknown god ("force cachée") that he be spared from total decrepitude:

que sa puissance usée une dernière fois sursaute,  
se ramasse, et qu'une autre ivresse l'envahisse!<sup>38</sup>

This prayer is for fulfilment by entry into the beyond, "l'énigme qui fut la sombre source de ses pleurs" (P/I, p.88), despite the lack of assurances we have about it. It ends with a wish that he may rejoice in death "comme le bois n'apprend qu'en sa défaite à éblouir".

The second poem is addressed to the dying man, urging him to be free from fear: "ne laisse pas la peur te désarmer" (P/I, p.88). There is hope of victory, not by weapons or words, but by the mysteries of light and vision:

Passe emportée par ton dernier regard ouvert...

Où le regard s'enfonce et vibre comme un fer de lance,  
l'âme pénètre et trouve obscurément sa récompense.  
(P/I, p.89)

37. (contd) croire, un temps, parce que j'étais alors jeune, insouciant, et que je ne savais pas du tout ce qu'est la mort (dont pourtant je ne cessais impudemment, sottement, de parler), qu'en s'efforçant de garder les yeux tournés vers ces éclaircies qui semblent d'abord désigner un autre monde, on devait réussir à aborder sans douleur, sans rupture, à ce monde" (Ver, p.37).

38. P/I, p.87. I cannot help recalling Dylan Thomas's line: "Rage, rage against the dying of the light!", which Jaccottet probably did not know. Here, in any case, the hope is for a positive acceptance of death, not a revolt against it. In these lines the intensity of feeling is compounded not only by the remarkable alliteration of sibilants but also by the patterns of vowels: "une autre" echoes "sursaut", and "envahisse" transposes "sa

The visual images, as we expect with Jaccottet, are of light and landscape. Here it is appropriately autumn:

Les peupliers sont encore debout dans la lumière  
de l'arrière saison, ils tremblent près de la rivière,  
une feuille après l'autre avec docilité descend,  
éclairant la menace des rochers rangés derrière.  
Forte lumière incompréhensible du temps,  
Ô larmes, larmes de bonheur sur cette terre!

The beauty of the visible world inspires an emotion unsoured by death - like the "heureuses larmes" of "Paroles dans l'air" (P/I, p.72). That ineffable light makes one believe that there are openings into the beyond, that safe passage is possible:

Passe: il y a de la place entre les terres et les bois...  
passe avec le passage irrésistible des oiseaux...  
(P/I, p.89)

The next poem lists three sepulchral offerings, suggested perhaps by the cakes and ale offered to the dead of ancient Egypt. In this case they give spiritual succour, they are "trois coups légers" to open the mysterious door. The first is a trembling reed, the second a word spoken by the beloved woman - although earlier (P/I, p.88) the poet denied that a woman's lamp could light the path - and the third one is "un souvenir de la lumière tout en haut de l'air..." (P/I, p.90) It is a brief poem of fervent faith.

This is followed, in poems four and five, by doubt. The dream of passage, of upward flight into transparent space, is evoked in the past tense as a fire burnt out:

tout ce qui m'a semblé voler comme une flèche  
à travers des cloisons à mesure emportées  
vers un but plus limpide à mesure et plus haut,  
c'était peut-être une bâtisse de roseaux  
maintenant écroulée, en flammes, consumée... (P/I, p.90)

They are dismissed as illusion by a restatement of Jaccottet's fundamental agnosticism, a short sentence with a rhetorical inversion recalling the Bible: "Seule demeure l'ignorance". A more modest tone follows, with the image of a man going out at daybreak to experience that uncertain "hésitation de la lumière" which "nourrit l'amour". But then the poet is seized by a sense of falsehood and futility, and launches into self-criticism - despite his subtle ideas about souls flying upward or vision passing beyond, he cannot dispose of the fear of death. The agitation of his question is compounded by broken rhythms:

...mais si la  
mort était vraiment là comme il le faudra une fois,  
où seront les images, les subtils pensers, la foi  
préservée à travers la longue vie? (P/I, p.91)

This is the feeling expressed earlier of a hostile balance or an unequal struggle:

...quel combat  
l'emporterait sur cette agression par en bas?

The advice and consolation offered earlier in the sequence cannot overcome "la frousse du corps aux abois", or "le spectre de la poussière", images that prefigure those of L'Obscurité, Leçons and Chants d'en bas.

Poem six brings us to a place of burial, where the poet says:

je ne peindrai qu'un arbre qui retient dans son feuillage  
le murmure doré d'une lumière de passage... (P/I, p.91)

Jaccottet later explained the intention of these lines by saying: "j'ai cherché à introduire la plus belle image que je puisse opposer à la mort".<sup>39</sup> And the lines that follow insist

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39. "Un effort de correction", in NRF, June 1958, p.1124. Here he criticizes himself for writing "des formules trop évidemment 'poétiques', je veux dire plus jolies que belles".

on the Rilkean view that beauty and death are inseparable, and indeed that perception of beauty depends on mortality:

Nul ne peut séparer feu et cendre, rire et poussière,  
nul n'aurait reconnu la beauté sans son lit de râles...  
(P/I, p.92)

It was pages like this which prompted Clancier to write in his review of L'Ignorant:

l'alliance des contraires captive par une insolite harmonie: tant de résonance à la grâce des jours unie à tant d'abandon au couronnement de la mort.<sup>40</sup>

The last poem is a single quatrain, this time in alexandrins, in which the image of the blazing wood echoes the last line of poem one. Here it is an almond-tree in winter, and its dual significance cannot be resolved:

...qui dira si ce bois  
sera bientôt vêtu dans les ténèbres  
ou de fleurs dans le jour une nouvelle fois?  
Ainsi l'homme nourri de la terre funèbre. (P/I, p.92)

That provides a suitably ambiguous and agnostic close for the sequence, and for the whole collection.

"Le Livre des morts" must be considered not as a quest for a new religious formulation but as a poetic expression of Jaccottet's central preoccupations in the 1950's. For this, and for its accomplished style, it remains a landmark in his work. Five years later he was to speak of it in these terms:

Dans l'automne (de 1956), j'écrivis plusieurs poèmes que la pensée de la mort, comme je l'avais souhaité, éclairait par instants. Mon éternelle inquiétude y chantait à voix plutôt basse (...) je croyais avoir acquis (...) comment dire? un ton, un rythme, un accent, une façon de maintenir le discours à mi-hauteur entre la conversation et l'éloquence (...) et je croyais pouvoir me dire que, disposant désormais d'un instrument bien accordé et d'une technique, je devais me montrer avec moins de peine, moins de rechutes et d'intermittences, meilleur interprète de la musique qui me guidait...<sup>41</sup>

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40. In Mercure de France, July 1958, p.504.

41. In the note dated 7 June 1961, appended to the second



It is alongside "Le Livre des morts" that we must consider the poem "Prière entre la nuit et le jour", which is placed at the beginning of *L'Ignorant*, in italics, as a prologue. Its tone of fervent prayer allies it to the concluding sequence, as does its archaic style and phonic richness, for example the alliteration of 't's, 's's, 'l's, and 'f's in these lines:

pour que l'aurore, avec sa tendresse tenace,  
pour que l'entrée de la lumière au ras des monts,  
comme elle éloigne la lune légère, efface  
ma propre fable, et de son feu voile mon nom. (*P/I*, p.51)

The image of sunrise over the hills suggests Grignan, and the periphrastic reference to a son ("l'héritier de leurs batailles") implies it was written after the birth of Antoine Jaccottet in 1954. It may even date from 1956;<sup>42</sup> and there is no doubt that its deliberately non-chronological placing was meant to add unity to the *recueil*.

Our realization that this is not just one poem among others helps us to accept the italics and the archaic diction - "la très belle guerrière désarmée et nue" sounds very Petrarchist - and to seek a symbolic meaning. Thus the first quatrain's depiction of the hour before dawn presents Jaccottet's philosophical uncertainty: he writes in a state of hesitation between "la clarté" and the threatening shadows. The tableau of the next quatrain presents the praying poet as typical member of humanity, responsible for a wife and a child who will grow up. The third quatrain states the man's fearfulness

41.(contd) edition of *La Promenade*, pp.141-2. The style of these poems will be discussed presently.

42. That phrase "l'entrée de la lumière" is echoed in a note of August 1956: "l'entrée en scène de cette lumière écartant de son poing toutes les autres..." (*Prom*, p.139).

in a time of catastrophe when there is no "secours du dehors", no God to beseech. The last quatrain cannot then be a simple plea for divine succour: the man's hope and supplication is that he be overwhelmed, effaced; that the brightness of dawn should triumph over his own "fable", his falseness, pride and impurity.

This notion of effacement appears in various poems of L'Ignorant, associated always with images of light: "L'effacement soit ma façon de resplendir" (P/E, p.76), and:

oubliez même notre nom. Écoutez-nous parler  
avec la voix du jour, et laissez seulement  
briller le jour... (P/I, p.68)

For Jaccottet, a poet can receive illumination only by renunciation. He must not, for example, seek to possess certainty and knowledge, accepting instead the necessary discomfort of "l'ignorance". And ultimately he must renounce all selfhood to become a servant of light. This is a theme Jaccottet develops at the end of La Promenade sous les arbres.

In a sense every poem of L'Ignorant is an agnostic "prière entre la nuit et le jour". The prologue-poem sums up admirably the symbolism of light and dawn that pervades the collection. And its tone of high seriousness attests very well to the author's quasi-religious view of poetry.

Jaccottet's style in L'Ignorant is more uniform than in L'Effraie, and has all the same virtues. The modest, whispering tone and the natural clarity of language impressed those who first read it: "Quelle musique discrète, inoubliable monte de ces chants à mi-voix! (...) la simplicité enfin de l'allure, de la phrase (...) la langue la plus évidente qu'il

nous ait été donnée, depuis longtemps, d'entendre..."<sup>43</sup> And such was indeed the style the author intended, judging by this note of 1952: "Peut-être est-ce la justesse de ton qu'il faut poursuivre d'abord (plutôt que de chercher à inventer des formes nouvelles ou se laisser obséder par l'idée du chef-d'oeuvre...)"<sup>44</sup>

The lack of eloquence and brilliance in this style was noticed by all the reviewers, and commended: "Il se retient de tout lyrisme voyant, de tout éclat, de toute échappée dans le chant, de toute consommation avide ou laborieuse de richesse verbale". With those words Jacques Charpier<sup>45</sup> characterizes the style in negative terms. He goes on to say that Jaccottet "s'y livre plus souvent à la réflexion qu'à l'imagination, et donne ainsi une structure prosaïque à son poème". And Jean Follain justifies such poetic defects as "ce léger gauchissement que supposent les dires de l'ineffable" (NRF, May 1958, p.896), thus accepting Jaccottet's own belief that:

Moins il y a d'avidité et de faconde  
en nos propos, mieux on les néglige pour voir  
jusque dans leur hésitation briller le monde  
entre le matin ivre et la légèreté du soir. (P/I, P.76)

In fact verbal richness that does exist in parts of L'Ignorant prompts reservations from L.-G. Gros: "j'admire sans adhérer des poèmes très construits comme 'Le Laveur de vaisselle', d'une écriture à mon sens trop étudiée, trop ornementale..."<sup>46</sup>

43. G.-E. Clancier in Mercure de France, July 1958, p.504.

44. In Pour l'art no. 24, Lausanne, May-June 1952, p.7.

45. Charpier in Les Lettres nouvelles, 6, 1 (1958), p.749.

46. In Cahiers du Sud, June 1958, p.447. Perhaps this is why "Le Laveur de vaisselle" was excluded from Jaccottet's Poésie 1946-1967, despite Starobinski's praise in its preface (p.9) for that very poem. It is unlikely that Jaccottet would now like the line: "La nuit roule et soupèse des diamants dans ses gants sombres" (L'Ignorant, p.67). J.-P. Richard, however, analyses with apparent admiration the phonic richness of three lines from P/I,

Gros then adds: Jaccottet excelle davantage dans uncertain compte-rendu de l'expérience vécue (...) que dans la projection d'un mythe" - a sharp judgment that draws attention to the poems' differing presentations. There are on the one hand modest poems which seem to spring directly from personal experience (such as "La Patience", "La Voix", "Lettre du vingt-six juin", "Sur les pas de la lune" and "Soleil d'hiver"); and on the other hand there are more impersonal poems with imagined settings. "L'Insurrection au-delà des chânaies", "Dans un tourbillon de neige", and parts of "Le Livre des morts" are more pretentious than any other of Jaccottet's poems since Requiem. Some present fictitious characters who are personas of the author - for example "Le Laveur de vaisselle" and "Le Locataire". It is as though he was seeking, at this time, imaginative structures in which his poems might be distanced from himself. Perhaps they helped him to write; but they are responsible also for an unwelcome complexity. The ambitious symbolism of "La Promenade à la fin de l'été" is successful because it grows out of the real situation given at the start of the poem. In "L'Insurrection au-delà des chânaies", however, the myth-making is too self-conscious to carry conviction:

A travers les montagnes transparentes,  
je le vois qui se jette dans la mort:  
un taureau tout en armes l'ensanglante,  
enfonce dans l'asphalte tête et corps.<sup>47</sup>

That exercise in striking imagery was, however, only a brief

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46. (contd) p.54 (In Onze Etudes sur la poésie moderne, pp.262-3).

47. L'Ignorant, p.56. A natural source for the notion of transparent mountains is given in La Promenade, p.64. Clerval comments (p.55): "De son belvédère qui domine un paysage en contrefort des Basses-Alpes, le poète aperçoit derrière les mouvements de la lumière et le cycle du temps, le choc d'une puissance acharnée contre une puis-

detour.

Of greater importance for Jaccottet's "justesse de ton" is his manipulation of rhythm. L'Ignorant, like L'Effraie before it, shows at once a respect for orderly traditional versification and a flexibility, a fluidity, that blurs its formal outlines: "la régularité métrique des poèmes ne s'impose pas à la lecture".<sup>48</sup> The strongly auditory nature of his style is more apparent in this volume, where typically the metre serves to create smooth, gentle, incantatory rhythms (what is commonly, though dubiously, called "musicality").

The metre chosen more frequently than any other is the alexandrin; yet here it does not dominate, and as in L'Effraie it is treated with considerable freedom. Jaccottet never maintains for long the monotony of two hémistiches to the line, introducing frequent alexandrins ternaires and less common forms. Furthermore, the enjambements tend to break rather than reaffirm the metre, as in "Paroles dans l'air" (P/I, p.72) where two lines actually end in hyphens. This extreme example is from one of the almost rhymeless poems, which remain less numerous than poems that are fully rhymed. As in L'Effraie, there are few poems with a half-breed rhyme-scheme: rhyming is either complete or barely perceptible. In L'Ignorant Jaccottet shows a fondness for quatrains, but he no longer practises such a strict form as the sonnet. And he deviates more frequently from an isometric system - it is not uncommon for a poem to use two or three metres, whether by occasional departure from the norm or by free mixing of

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47.(contd) sance tout immobile".

48. Charpier, loc. cit., p.748.

lines of different length. These are almost always "des mètres pairs": octosyllables, decasyllables and alexandrins; second in importance to the alexandrin is a line of fourteen syllables; and occasionally we have even a line of sixteen syllables, but by this stage accurate counting is neither easy nor useful, since Jaccottet counts some mute 'e's and not others - or rather, he gauges metre with his ear, not his fingers.

The line of fourteen syllables calls for extended comment, because the effects achieved through it constitute an original contribution to prosody, the successful development of a metre virtually unknown in French verse.<sup>49</sup> Jaccottet had used it already in Requiem, but only in passing: "Puis ne coururent plus que des insectes de lueurs..." (p.20). Later, in the poem "Dans les rues d'une ville..."<sup>50</sup> dated about 1951, it occurs in nearly every line; and this experiment must have encouraged Jaccottet to choose it as the metre for his verse

49. Since T. Elwert's Traité de versification française (Paris, Klincksieck 1965), is the only standard work on French metrics to mention it, here is the complete entry (p.126):

On rencontre des exemples de vers à 14 syllables dans la poésie lyrique de l'ancien français puis au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle chez les poètes burlesques avides d'extravagances (Scarron), et enfin chez Verlaine, qui l'emploie aussi sans césure. La césure se place après la 6<sup>e</sup>, 7<sup>e</sup> ou 8<sup>e</sup> syllabe; certains poètes coupent le vers par deux césures (4+4+6 ou 6+4+4).

Il fait meilleur à Paris, // où l'on boit avec la glace.  
(Scarron)

Je chante l'Homme blanc, // l'homme premier; // la race  
belle. (J. Romain)

We may add that Supervielle's verset often has fourteen syllables, with a coupe after the seventh; and that a younger poet, Jacques Réda, who admires Jaccottet, uses the 14-syllable line frequently in his Amen (Gallimard, 1968).

50. L'Ignorant, pp.16-17.

translation of the Odyssey, made between 1953 and 1955.<sup>51</sup> In his preface to this version, he says that the oral nature of Homer's epic and its use of conventional formulae persuaded him that a prose-translation would be "un contre-sens perpétuel". Another note of the same period insists more strongly on its auditory nature: "si les progrès de la technique l'avaient permis, j'aurais préféré voir mon essai de traduction enregistré sur bandes magnétiques plutôt qu'imprimé".<sup>52</sup> His choice of metre is justified thus: "l'essentiel, ici, était qu'une régularité fût maintenue, et qu'elle ne fût pas celle de l'alexandrin".<sup>53</sup> We may guess that he did not wish to associate Homer with the tame classicism of the French alexandrin; and we may note that fourteen is closer than twelve to the syllable-count of the Greek hexameter.

In the translation and also in Jaccottet's original poems, this line of fourteen syllables remains associated with the alexandrin. In his hands it is a metre characterized by gravity and nobility, by sonorous weightiness. It is a true "mètre pair" in that the commas and coupes inside it come after an even number of syllables. Furthermore, these

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51. Published in 1955 (Paris, Club français du livre) after what the preface calls less than two years' work. It was commended in 1972 as "une des traductions les plus achevées qu'il ait données" (J.-P. Amette in NRF, Feb. 1972, p.87).

52. In Gazette de Lausanne, 10-11 Dec. 1955, p.14, in "Remarques sur l'Odyssée", accompanying a fragment of the translation.

53. Notes to Homère, L'Odyssée, 1955, p.498. Jaccottet apologizes for putting in an occasional alexandrin with the comment: "il m'est apparu cependant qu'un principe ne devait pas toujours être appliqué jusque dans ses conséquences dernières". His preface says that the example of Homer-translation that most inspired him was that of Simone Weil, who renders parts of the Iliad line by line, staying close to the Greek word-order ("L'Iliade ou le Poème de la Force" in Cahiers du Sud, 1940-41 and 1947, and in S. Weil, La Source grecque, Paris, 1953). She adopts no regular metre, but occasionally has fourteen







But even apart from special effects, the overall tone achieved by these long lines is one of solemnity, particularly in the prologue "Prière entre la nuit et le jour" (P/I, p.51) and in "Le Livre des morts". The reasons why Jaccottet then sought regularity and gravity are best seen in remarks of a more general nature. In La Promenade sous les arbres, discussing some quotations from Hölderlin, and others, he declares:

il y a d'abord un rythme, (...) dont le principal effet est sans doute de dégager immédiatement le texte de tout souci d'utilité afin qu'il flotte dans l'air un peu au-dessus de l'utile mais pas trop au-dessus pour ne pas perdre contact avec l'espèce de réalité au sein de laquelle vivent les hommes. La poésie devient alors simple nomination des choses, et rejoint, sans pour autant se confondre avec elle, une certaine forme de prière (Prom, pp.124-5).

This can be interpreted as a pragmatic justification of regular verse. In Eléments d'un songe, he adds a philosophical and speculative apology for it. The passage in question is concerned with his intuitions of something quasi-divine:

il y a quelque chose qui ne m'a jamais abandonné (...): une espèce de rythme, l'observation d'une mesure indubitable et pourtant lointaine, (...) il faut bien dire mesure, parce que cela peut signifier à la fois une ordonnance du temps et de l'espace, parce que cela comporte l'idée d'une règle, d'une certaine sévérité... (El, pp.134-5)

J'ai envie de parler (...) mais je ne peux parler n'importe comment. Il ne s'agit plus d'un résultat à atteindre, d'un objet à acquérir, d'une explication à donner, et le langage commun ne suffira pas... (El, p.137)

A la mesure que j'ai perçue répond nécessairement cette mesure du vers, et sans doute y répond-elle selon ma nature, selon les dispositions de mon oreille intérieure: le pas que j'ai entendu était lent, solennel, non pas d'une solennité de parade mais par la gravité de la marche, quelquefois hésitant... (El, p.139)

In view of this argument, with its choice of the word "nécessairement", we may wonder that Jaccottet did not continue to write in long measured verses after 1956. In fact he hoped to, and attempted to, according to a note of 1961,<sup>57</sup> which explains

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57. Prom, p.142. Some of these attempts appear in La Semaïson,

that the very different style of Airs emerged after a long silence. More recently he has returned to a discursive style, with frequent lines of twelve or fourteen syllables, but without that solemn regularity.<sup>58</sup> L'Ignorant was left behind, not because of its weaknesses, but because of the difficulty of following up its success.

During the summer of 1956,<sup>59</sup> before the last poems of L'Ignorant were composed, Jaccottet completed his first prose-work, La Promenade sous les arbres. Its opening chapter, "La Vision et la Vue", must have been written quickly,<sup>60</sup> since it was occasioned by his reading of the 335th number of the Cahiers du Sud, dated June 1956. Some of the subsequent chapters, however, had appeared before then.<sup>61</sup> And in any case the reflections explored in the book had begun much earlier, as the introductory pages insist.

What the Cahiers du Sud offered was an introduction to the Irish writer A.E. (George William Russell), with trans-

57. (contd) notably pp.24-28 dated November 1959.

58. See all three parts of A la lumière d'hiver, 1977. An exception is the prologue to Leçons, which in this edition has become a quatrain of rhymed fourteen-syllable lines (p.9).

59. According to Prom, p.141. All page references are to the 2nd edition (1961).

60. Prom, p.21. Jaccottet's literary chronicle in the Gazette de Lausanne of July 21-22, 1956 (p.10), entitled "A.E. Clairvoyant", is either a sketch or a summary of this chapter. The final version appears in the NRF of December 1956 (pp.1003-1022) as "La Vue et la Vision".

61. The Gazette de Lausanne published a fragment of the dialogue "La Promenade sous les arbres" on October 15-16, 1955, and the chapter "L'Habitant de Grignan" on April 7-8, 1956, where the date of writing is given as January 1956.

lations by L.-G. Gros from Song and its Fountains, and - in an earlier publication<sup>62</sup> which Jaccottet then read - from The Candle of Vision (Jaccottet actually confuses these two in attributing to this latter work his epigraph for La Promenade, which really comes from Gros's version of Song and its Fountains.<sup>63</sup>) These writings of A.E. filled Jaccottet with the excitement of discovery and recognition - of Le Flambeau de la Vision he says: "ce livre, en son début au moins, était celui-là moins, / était celui-là même que j'aurais voulu, et n'avais jamais pu écrire".<sup>64</sup>

Jaccottet immediately saw a close parallel between his own wish to explore the temporal sources of poetry and A.E.'s efforts "to relate his own vision to the seers and writers of the sacred books".<sup>65</sup> A.E. claimed that the poetry of the past had sprung from visionary experiences like his own:

I believe that all poetry is born beneath the dream consciousness. I have only been more curious than others about the forge in which poetry is fashioned.<sup>66</sup>

And indeed A.E.'s intuitions of a mysterious world bear striking resemblances to those of Novalis and Roud:

I knew the Golden Age was all about me, and it was we who had been blind to it, but that it had never passed away from the world.<sup>67</sup>

62. Documents spirituels, no.2, Cahiers du Sud, Marseille 1952.

63. Cahiers du Sud, June 1956, p.48 Cf. A.E., Song and its Fountains, London, 1932, p.66.

64. Prom, p.22. His initial enthusiasm may seem excessive; but it was shared by Georges Bataille, who declared in Critique (No.61, 1952, p.483): "Ce n'est pas seulement un chef-d'oeuvre littéraire: de ce dont A.E. nous entretient, jamais, me semble-t-il, nous n'avions entendu parler".

65. The Candle of Vision, London, 1928, preface. Quoted in Prom, p.24.

66. Song and its Fountains, London, 1932, p.62.

67. The Candle of Vision, p.9.

Jaccottet was reminded also of Hölderlin, in passages such as this: "The gods are still living. They are our brothers. They await us".<sup>68</sup> Above all, he felt that he himself had encountered some of the things that A.E. so carefully retold, "impressions fugaces(...) auxquelles l'intensité de l'expérience vécue exigeait pourtant que l'on accordât plus de prix qu'aux événements les plus visibles et les massifs de la vie quotidienne ou de l'histoire".<sup>69</sup>

That was enough to convince Jaccottet that A.E. was discussing things that really mattered, and to prompt him to explore his own thoughts about The Candle of Vision. As he probed further, however, he found that his reactions were less enthusiastic, that A.E. was less close to him than he had first thought. He had misgivings about the style, which had seemed so attractive in its modesty and simplicity (Prom, p.23), but which indulged in gaudy images of a "Many-Coloured Land" of gold and jewels. To Jaccottet, these represented a betrayal of truth and reality, a stylistic short-cut by which A.E. had cheated. His criticisms here announce the themes of "mensonge" and "orgueil" developed later in L'Obscurité. (A.E.'s alleged defects are not the fault of Gros's translation either, since on the whole it reads less quaintly than the original.) Jaccottet did not find that this "literary" tone and imagery solved the problem of how to express mysterious intuitions, and would return later in his

68. Ibid., p.44, quoted in Prom, p.29. Cf. Hölderlin (in "Brot und Wein"): "Zwar leben die Götter,/Aber über dem Haupt droben in anderer Welt". Hölderlin, however, laments the gods' absence, whereas to the Irishman they seem less impossibly distant - perhaps because of his proximity to primitive traditions. Nevertheless, A.E. considers the present age to be one of iron (ibid., p.34).

69. Prom, pp.25-26. His emphasis.

book to that problem.

A more fundamental question concerned the essential character of these intuitions; and here too A.E. proved ultimately disappointing. Jaccottet sympathized with his "rage de l'Absolu" (Prom, p.37), and appreciated his freedom from religious doctrines.<sup>70</sup> But A.E.'s visions were too ethereal, too much out of contact with the natural world, ultimately "pâles, froides, exsangues" (p.39). By contrast, says Jaccottet, "moi, j'avais cru voir le secret dans la terre, les clefs dans l'herbe" (Prom, p.41). There is a basic disagreement between "la vue", Jaccottet's scrutiny of visible things, and "la vision", the supernatural hallucinations of A.E., who freely uses other-worldly phrases like "the Divine Mind" or "the Planetary Spirit". Thus the opening chapter, by stating this disagreement, serves to introduce the reader indirectly to Jaccottet's chief preoccupations, and to prepare the ground for the "Exemples" which follow, chapters concerned largely with observation of landscape. A.E. is left behind, and mentioned again only once.<sup>71</sup> As Jacques Masui puts it: "les textes qui suivent paraissent, en effet, appartenir à un autre cycle".<sup>72</sup> They have more points of contact with the poems of L'Ignorant and with the subsequent prose-texts of La Semaïson and Paysages avec figures absentes.

These central chapters are concerned not so much to define theoretically the kind of illumination Jaccottet values,

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70. Georges Bataille also speaks of A.E.'s "mystique purement poétique" and of "intentions informes, qui ne sont pas orientées par des croyances reçues" (in Critique, No.61, 1952, pp.483, 486).

71. In La Promenade, p.129, and nowhere in Jaccottet's later work.

72. In Cahiers du Sud, January 1958, p.143.

as to recount examples of the experiences he has had. They are thus exercises in poetic prose, different in character from his chapter of critical reflections on issues raised by A.E.

Setting the scene specifically at Grignan, as he had not previously done, Jaccottet explores the visual subjects the region offers and the images they evoke in his mind. These subjects - mountains, rivers and vegetation; morning, evening and night - are ones that will dominate many of his subsequent writings, in particular La Semaïson. He is concerned above all with certain phenomena of light observed in winter and early spring:

il serait peut-être utile, avant d'aller plus loin, d'interpréter avec attention ces heures matinales, en hiver, où une clarté comme neigeuse ou savonneuse, encore très faible, s'insinue sur les pierres...

(Prom, p.52)

Cette lumière, la plus commune des lumières de printemps, n'en a pas moins quelque chose de surprenant: merveilleuse, et presque un peu effrayante... (Prom, p.99)

Some paragraphs - and some of the most relaxed and lyrical - are simply descriptions of things seen. But the impulse to engage in interpretation is never absent long:

...on pourrait simplement laisser ce texte tel qu'il est, compte rendu à peu près exact d'une impression, songerie sans poids, aveu de bonheur... Mais il est vrai que je suis le premier à en attendre davantage, quelque chose comme un enseignement. (Prom, p.78)

That phrase indicates a didactic intention in these "exemples", though of course Jaccottet is learner rather than teacher. He wants to find out how and why certain scenes at certain hours induce in him a poetic mood, and give him a special sense of pleasure and truth. And indeed the texts might not have been written but for this intellectual curiosity:

...il a fallu que j'essaie de comprendre ces émotions et le rapport qui les liait à la poésie. Une curiosité,

plus ou moins saine, s'était emparée de moi, c'est elle qui m'a fait écrire les quelques textes qui suivent... (Prom, p.20)

In the impressions he records, two of the most important general features identified are weightlessness and openness. "La légèreté" is described above all in the chapter, "L'Approche des montagnes", where his elation comes from seeing the tops of the hills but not their bases. They seem to float, "des masses pesantes sont devenues pareilles à des fumées" (Prom, p.64); he beholds, as it were, "la pesanteur changée en souffle", a momentary fulfilment of "ce rêve de légèreté et d'altitude qui me hante de plus en plus souvent".<sup>73</sup> Such apparent weightlessness would make possible the free upward movement of matter which he imagines later in the book:

comme si toutes choses cherchaient à devenir de plus en plus gracieuses et de plus en plus lumineuses, à monter sans relâche, grâce à l'amour qu'elles nous inspirent, vers une sorte de cime... (p.131)

The symbolic meaning of this ascension is all the more clear in that Jaccottet regularly associates heaviness with evil and suffering.

The sense of openness, "ouverture", is related to that of lightness in suggesting the possibility of free movement. We have already encountered it in L'Ignorant as a recurring motif of passage ; and it appears also in the first chapter of La Promenade:

Le problème, pour notre esprit, serait moins d'entasser des rochers, de bâtir des temples, que d'ouvrir des passages dans les murs. (Prom, p.36)

To Jaccottet the human mind is surrounded, normally, by walls

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73. Prom, p.66. J.-P. Richard discusses this dream at the start of his essay. Quoting from Prom, p.118, he writes: "ce vœu essentiel entraîne ici un double mouvement; il réclame à la fois notre envol au-dessus du monde et l'insensible volatilisation de celui-ci. La matière s'élève donc, s'aérise avec nous, devient nuage" (Onze études sur la poésie moderne, p.258).



of limits of some kind, barriers to a greater hope or expansion. Thus a sentence like, "il y a des passages dans les prés" (Prom, p.89), means that he perceives, occasionally, in the visible world, the possibility of openings in these barriers. Such experiences stimulate his longing for a symbolic passage through and beyond death.

It is easy to accept that impressions can nourish dreams, but it is less easy to share Jaccottet's earnestness in the pursuit of what seem to be illusions. He is aware of this - perhaps more so after his own unease at reading A.E. And so he makes various attempts to justify his approach, claiming, for example, that "Cette illusion faisait partie, à sa manière, du monde réel" (Prom, p.79). If this statement seems to do violence to the word "réel", that is because reality is one of the chief issues. Far from dismissing the aspiration behind such mirages, Jaccottet chooses (as Peter Broome puts it):

to study it as a central piece of evidence in a mysterious trial. Why should one call dream a seemingly luminous but unverifiable part of one's experience, and reality that part which continues to live on tangible guarantees?<sup>74</sup>

This question cannot, of course, be easily settled. The last of the "Exemples" is, appropriately, a dialogue between two voices, one poetic and the other critical, containing this amusing rejoinder:

L'autre:-J'espère que vous êtes conscient de l'extrême subjectivité de vos remarques, et que tout cela contredit gravement la vérité.

Jaccottet's defense is that the intense pleasure given by his experiences somehow validates them, especially as his attempts

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74. P. Broome in the Australian Journal of French Studies, 1968, p.122.

to explore them in words serve to heighten and not spoil that pleasure. He argues typically by rhetorical question:

Ne sentez-vous pas néanmoins, obscurément mais profondément peut-être comme moi, qu'il y a dans ces rencontres la manifestation d'un haut degré de réalité en même temps qu'une sorte d'ouverture ou de chemin pour le regard? Il faut bien qu'il y ait une raison à notre bonheur sous ces arbres...<sup>75</sup>

We must concede, at least, that many poets and mystics have had similar feelings, and that the suspicion that they are probably mirages does not satisfactorily explain why they occur and give such pleasure. The frequent self-criticism which accompanies Jaccottet's quest helps to disarm the reader's incredulity and make him more fully involved in the book.

Perhaps the deepest problem investigated in La Promenade is the relationship between reality and death. Jaccottet often thinks of mortality as a burden or a barrier; but his view of it in these pages is not always negative. One tentative answer he proposes for his questions is that, paradoxically, "c'est la mort qui éclaire nos journées" (Prom, p.101). This idea is difficult to grasp - and the author does not pretend otherwise: to him it is a flash of mysterious insight. One approach to it is by the importance he places on ephemeral things, such as streams and leaves (while he remains unmoved by diamonds which are forever). In the text "La Rivière échappée" he says:

Il me semble, mais comment le faire comprendre ou seulement croire, que ce n'est pas dans (les bijoux) que se concentrent la force, la réalité, la puissance qui nous permettraient d'envisager la mort avec plus de courage, mais justement, pourquoi? en ces points du monde où celle-ci règne par la mobilité et la fragilité; et, par exemple, dans les rivières; et, plus précisément encore, dans ce fragment de rivière

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75. Prom, p.101. Cf. the rhetorical questions on pp.79-80 and 82.

auquel je reviens toujours, ici, entre les arbres  
et les prés.<sup>76</sup>

A later passage explores this observation in terms of the  
relation between a movement and an obstacle:

...le bois et l'eau me faisaient découvrir ou le  
vent, ou la lumière, ou tous les deux ensemble,  
c'est-à-dire que le visible me révélait l'invisible,  
l'obstacle le mouvement et la direction du  
mouvement (...) Je crus comprendre alors la nécessité  
pour nos yeux, et non moins pour notre être, âme,  
coeur, esprit comme on voudra nommer les formes de  
notre vie intérieure, d'un obstacle et d'une limite,  
donc aussi bien d'une fin, pour que cet être pût,  
précisément, briller et même tout bonnement vivre.  
Je crus comprendre un instant qu'il nous fallait  
bénir cette mort sans laquelle la lumière et l'amour,  
de même que nos paroles, ne pourraient plus avoir  
aucun sens ni d'ailleurs aucune possibilité  
d'existence. (Prom, p.120-1)

In other words, we need visible things limiting us in space,  
and we need death limiting us in time. Death defines life.  
But Jaccottet goes on immediately to speak of death not just  
as the context or condition of meaning and beauty and joy,  
but as their source:

J'étais obligé de me dire, toujours avec hâte légère,  
que c'était de la mort que devaient sourdre toute la  
beauté du notre vie et vraiment nos joies les plus  
profondes... (Prom, p.121)

There is a leap in the logic here. What he calls death (but  
perhaps "fate" or "destiny" are closer to his meaning?) is  
seen now as an active contributor to happiness, not just a  
prerequisite - it receives credit even for our intimations of  
immortality. This bold paradox provides some of La Promenade's  
most fervent pages, and supplies a thematic point to the frag-  
mentary descriptions of ephemeral beauty which make up its  
central chapters. Jaccottet's most convincing expression of  
it, perhaps, is found in the oracular poem, "Que la fin nous

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76. Prom, p.91. Cf. p.38: "cette splendeur semble avoir sa  
source dans la mort, non dans l'éternel; cette beauté  
paraît dans le mouvant, l'éphémère, le fragile..." Cf.  
also P/I, p.92, and L'Ignorant, p.15.

illumine", which ended thus:

la mort, prochaine ou vague selon son désir,  
soit l'aliment de la lumière inépuisable. (P/I, p.76)

The enterprise envisaged, as J.-P. Richard says, "consiste à saisir rêveusement l'être dans la pratique de ce qui semblait le nier, et à retourner en une affirmation cette expérience négative".<sup>77</sup> Jaccottet was to return to it, more critically, in L'Obscurité.<sup>78</sup>

The third part of La Promenade sous les arbres is more of an essay on literature, with quotations from Hölderlin and others. Jaccottet begins by discussing the disorientation of modern poets; but his main concern is the question of how a poet should write, the question of what language can appropriately be used.

This was not a new question for him. The first poems of L'Ignorant had already asked: "comment chanterait-on sous ces pierres friables?" (P/I, p.53), and "...comment dire/ cette chose qui est trop pure pour la voix?" (P/I, p.57). And their answer had not been a confident one:

...qui avance  
dans la poussière n'a que son souffle pour tout bien,  
pour toute force qu'un langage peu certain. (P/I, p.53)

...tout cela  
ne serait-il qu'un vol de paroles dans l'air?<sup>79</sup>

And even earlier Jaccottet had voiced a passing impatience with his own images.<sup>80</sup> But nowhere had his suspicion of

77. J.-P. Richard, Onze études sur la poésie moderne, p.268.

78. E.g. Obs, pp.147-8, from which Richard quotes. There the narrator calls it "une sorte de rêve fou".

79. P/I, p.57. Cf. the sense of the futility of language in "Le Livre des morts", poem five (P/I, p.91).

80. E.g. L'Effraie, p.29: "Mais plus d'images entre nous", P/E, p.36: "images où se complaire!" Cf. P/I, p.91: "cela/ encore est une inoffensive image..."

language been as strong or as radical as it becomes in La Promenade after the criticisms of A.E. and the personal attempts at poetic prose. We see him here sharing in what has been a common reaction of poets against the confidence of Romanticism and Surrealism in the power of words. At one point he specifically criticizes the excessive facility of Surrealist imagery.<sup>81</sup>

Words, he says, are not obedient; they have their own impetus, which can carry a writer away from what he really means: "Je ne crois pas recommandable de trop jouer avec les mots, de trop se fier à leurs jeux..."<sup>82</sup> A.E. seemed to have been cheated by them, and Jaccottet feels that he too is their victim:

...ce n'est pas du tout ce que j'aurais aimé dire.  
 Bien des images me sont venues à la réflexion parce  
 qu'il n'est pas difficile de trouver des images, et  
 souvent, même imprécises, elles ont un charme qui  
 distrait (...) Et quand je pense à la rivière, à ce  
 que fut cette rivière, j'éprouve une espèce de honte  
 à l'avoir pareillement déformée. (Prom, p.92)

We can see here that his chief criterion is truth, for which beautiful lies and errors are no substitute. And the chief culprits, he thinks, are images:

Je sens que, pour dire cela, il faudrait un poème  
 presque sans adjectifs et réduit à très peu d'images.  
 (Prom, p.77)

To support his case he quotes an amusing passage of Robert Musil about similes and metaphors being "une manière d'échapper à l'objet qu'elles prétendent, en général, honorer" (Prom, p.112).

The reason why he cannot tolerate "l'altération de la

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81. Prom, p.114. Jaccottet does not, however, for his research into language, grasp the tools of linguistic science, as other recent poets have done.

82. Prom, p.78, Cf. pp.81, 114.

vérité" is that he seeks sources of hope not in imagination but in the real visible world. His goal is not, like so much poetry, "douceuse peinture de nuées" (Prom, p.130), but "la recherche de la justesse" (Prom, p.79), which can in his opinion produce a far more satisfying feeling of éclaircissement. As Jacques Masui put it in his review: "Ce que Jaccottet recherche peut-être avant tout - et par là il se sépare nettement de A.E. - c'est la constatation poétique de la chose elle-même, l'être de l'herbe, de l'eau, des arbres...".<sup>83</sup> This concern for reality made very appropriate the inclusion, in the first edition of the book, of sketches by Jaccottet's wife - for example a drawing of trees in the chapter of dialogue "La Promenade sous les arbres". Likewise appropriate is the mention on page 136 of Francis Ponge, whose researches into language and things Jaccottet had long been following.<sup>84</sup> Ponge's refusal of lyricism may have helped to inspire certain more sober passages in La Promenade, such as the scene in Corrèze on pages 88-89 and the discussion of the word "bois" on pages 98-99. And Ponge's work was to exercise a continuing attraction on him.

It must be noted that Jaccottet's rejection of "le stupéfiant image" is not absolute: he accepts that some images may obey "notre plus stricte vérité intérieure" and surmises that "de grandes émotions nous font pressentir nos

83. In Cahiers du Sud, Jan. 1958, p.141. Cf. Prom, pp.38-9: "je rêverais plutôt d'un enfoncement du regard dans l'épaisseur de l'incompréhensible et contradictoire réel..."

84. Jaccottet first discussed Ponge in his Formes et Couleurs reviews of 1946, where he pointed out a similarity between Ponge's object poems and Rilke's "Dinggedichte". His own phrase in La Promenade (p.40) "l'épaisseur du Visible" recalls Ponge's "l'épaisseur des choses" in his "Introduction au galet" (Proèmes).

liens avec le monde extérieur, nous suggèrent une unité cachée et nous font retrouver des images très anciennes qui semblent déposées à une certaine profondeur de la mémoire humaine" (Prom, p.115). But these are rare, and his discussion centres now on what he calls "le dépassement des images" (Prom, p.122). For this it is necessary, he says, to "renoncer aux trouvailles, même heureuses". But that alone does not solve the problem. He quotes fragments from Hölderlin and others, seeking to characterize their sublime transparency - "simple nomination des choses" (Prom, p.125) - and to discover "en quoi leur simplicité diffère entièrement du prosaïsme, de la familiarité ou de la brutalité du style direct".<sup>85</sup>

This question leads him to introduce "des considérations de morale" of a kind we have already encountered in L'Effraie and L'Ignorant:

...il faut non seulement une certaine expérience de l'outil verbal, mais aussi, et d'abord, un certain état intérieur (...) La moindre impureté du regard viendrait gêner la vision du monde où ces lueurs sont enfouies; le moindre souci de réussite en entacherait l'expression (...) le travail poétique, ainsi conçu, semble obéir aux mêmes lois que la conduit de notre vie.<sup>86</sup>

This is what one reviewer called "une éthique de la poésie".<sup>87</sup>

Jaccottet advocates for poets, and in the first place for himself, a life-style ruled by patience, attentiveness, simplicity and self-abnegation. Perhaps the secret lies in

85. Prom, p.126. Cf a review in Gazette de Lausanne, 28-29 May, 1955: "Il y a en poésie une certaine inflexion que le lecteur pressé serait tenté d'appeler 'prosaïque' (...) qui me touche d'une pointe aiguë. On l'entend par exemple, non pas dans les grands hymnes de Hölderlin, mais dans les poèmes qu'il écrivit au-delà de la folie (...) une grâce surnaturelle est accordée au langage le plus humble et le plus démuné".

86. Prom, pp.126-7. Cf. above, chapter III.

87. G. Anex in NRF, Oct. 1957, p.768.

what he calls an "état de transparence" (Prom, p.128), similar to a religious state of grace, "un certain état d'équilibre entre la tension et le détachement" (Prom, p.131), in which the voice of inspiration could speak through him. Mere relaxation is not the answer, but nor is hard work, "l'acharnement":

le travail que l'on opère sur les mots, tour à tour les laissant faire, puis les reprenant, les modifiant, de sorte qu'à la fin leur légèreté et leur limpidité soient aussi totales que possible, ce travail n'est pas seulement cérébral: il agit sur l'âme, il l'aide à s'alléger et à se purifier davantage encore, de sorte que la vie et la poésie, tour à tour, s'efforcent en nous vers une amélioration de nous-mêmes, et une clarté toujours plus grande.

Il faut évidemment se dépouiller de sa mauvaiseté, on n'en sort pas autrement. Il faut cesser de vouloir étonner à tout prix, ou accomplir de basses vengeance, ou plaire ou servir des causes. (Prom, pp.128-9)

The relation between poetics and ethics is particularly clear there. As J.-P. Richard remarks:

L'idéal serait donc, tout en partant une extrême attention au langage, de n'en plus prêter aucune attention à celui, à ce moi qui en est cependant la source et le soutien. Cette attention de la non-attention, Jaccottet la nomme effacement...<sup>88</sup>

This view of self-effacement as a condition for poetic receptivity<sup>89</sup> resembles somewhat that of the mystics of the via negativa, who saw it as a condition for spiritual illumination. Jaccottet lacks all religious conviction about a hidden god; he would like to consider himself as a humble "serviteur du Visible, et non plus comme son déchiffreur".<sup>90</sup> And yet his poetic quest has a spiritual dimension that is far from modest. We may recall the line:

88. J.-P. Richard, Onze études sur la poésie moderne, p.276.

89. Cf Sem, p.9 (May 1954): "L'attachement à soi augmente l'opacité de la vie. Un moment de vrai oubli, et tous les écrans les uns derrière les autres deviennent transparents, de sorte que l'on voit la clarté jusqu'au fond..."

90. Prom, p.131. Earlier (p.93) he had taken comfort from the very impossibility of full knowledge: "La vérité



L'effacement soit ma façon de resplendir.<sup>91</sup>

This effacement is, in Clerval's words, "l'amorce d'un mouvement vers la résorption par la lumière, la mort apparaissant comme le seuil obligé vers la clarté où l'être accepte de se fondre comme en un feu secret et rayonnant, centre de gravité de l'univers".<sup>92</sup>

The discussion of poetic ethics in La Promenade only touches on this deeper aspiration; it ends with two pages of sonorous prose, containing a paradoxical prayer: "Louée soit donc la mort qui nourrit notre passion" (Prom, p.133), at which point Jaccottet breaks off the chapter, which he called "Remarques sans fin". The two notes which conclude the book are in a more sober tone.<sup>93</sup> This does not make a very satisfying ending, but it is completely in character with the hesitations of the work. A sense of finality would have betrayed Jaccottet's themes and feelings.

La Promenade sous les arbres is not as well-known or as accomplished as Jaccottet's later prose-writings, yet it contains most of the themes developed in them. More surprisingly, its reflections bear many similarities to those found in Yves Bonnefoy's L'Improbable, which is recognized as an important statement from this post-war generation of poets. This work, published in 1959, was mostly written after Jaccottet's book.

90.(contd) sur les énigmes que nous propose le monde extérieur est peut-être que celles qu'on déchiffre s'annihilent, que les indéchiffrables seules peuvent nous nourrir et nous guider".

91. P/I, p.76. J.-P. Richard remarks: "quel orgueil, quel espoir, quelle prière aussi peut-être..." (Onze études sur la poésie moderne, p.276).

92. Clerval, p.42.

93. Note II bears the date 30 Aug. 1956. Note III, of 7 June 1961, did not of course appear in the first edition of 1957.

Bonnefoy, like Jaccottet, is preoccupied with rare instants of plenitude, of eternity in their uniqueness and ephemerality. He considers that poetry should help us to penetrate these moments of truth, but feels that words seldom do justice to reality (for this he blames conceptual language rather than imagery). He is fascinated by particular places and sights, and by the constant presence of death, which he thinks we must recognize and accept. And he develops a "théologie négative" or "esprit de veille" similar to Jaccottet's ethic of self-effacement. Indeed the ardent quasi-religious tone of his ending seems to echo that of La Promenade.

This is not to say that Bonnefoy was influenced by Jaccottet - though he admires the work of his Swiss acquaintance<sup>94</sup> - just that the two men have derived from the writings of the past and the questions of the present certain common preoccupations. To both of them, poetry is not an aesthetic exercise but a possible source of hope in a world from which the gods have departed.

Before leaving La Promenade, we may make some observations about its style. This first prose-work does not show Jaccottet as a brilliant master of language; but it does reveal an individual voice, at once diffident and persistent, which harmonizes perfectly with the murmuring intensity of his poems.

One of the pervading features of the book is its tentat-

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94. Bonnefoy's "Hommage à Philippe Jaccottet", in La Revue de Belles-Lettres, Lausanne, 1973, 3-4, p.109, acknowledges an affinity with him, and cites the poem "L'Ignorant" as "l'un des plus beaux que l'on ait écrits..." Jaccottet for his part welcomed the appearance of L'Improbable (in NRF, Sept. 1959, p.496, and in Augenblick, Jan.-April 1960, pp.16ff).

The following are some specific parallels between them:

iveness. From the cautious, indirect opening to the after-thoughts at the end, it is composed of fragments, seldom more than three small pages long, separated by asterisks that mark changes of tone or direction. These are quite well linked together, but they are not welded - or (to change the image) the book moves not like a rolling wheel but like a man on foot, with little momentum, at varying speeds, sometimes pausing or even backtracking. Jaccottet's title is indeed well-chosen.<sup>95</sup> As he says near the beginning:

...ces textes ne sont pas des poèmes, mais des tâtonnements, ou parfois de simples promenades, ou même des bonds et des envolées, dans le domaine fiévreux où la poésie, parfois, plus forte que toute réflexion ou hésitation, fleurit vraiment à la manière d'une fleur. (Prom, p.21)

Those words apply particularly to the "Exemples", in which flights of lyricism are more common, especially at the ends of chapters, without ever becoming separate prose-poems. Even there, the author never ceases to be "un marcheur voûté par ses doutes" (Prom, p.48).

The sense of groping is often made explicit by Jaccottet's apologies and asides, and by recurrent phrases like "comme si" or "tout provisoirement". His self-consciousness can be irritating at times, especially when he announces that his next step may seem ridiculous;<sup>96</sup> yet his obvious sincerity and

94. (contd) the statement "Il est aisé d'être poète parmi les lieux. Mais nous autres venons après les dieux" (L'Improbable, p.151) reads like a summary of Prom, pp.105-7; Bonnefoy's fascination with a bird-cry (L'Improbable, p.31) is shared by Jaccottet (P/E, pp.25, 28 etc.); and references in L'Improbable to "un esprit de veille" and "nommer ce qui se perd" (pp.7, 139) seem to echo Jaccottet's "Le Travail du poète" - "de veiller comme un berger et d'appeler/ tout ce qui risque de se perdre..." (P/I, p.64).

95. It alludes, incidentally, to Gustave Roud's Petit traité de la marche en plaine (1932).

96. E.g. Prom, pp.38, 54, 79, 101.

uncertainty also serve to heighten the reader's interest. The groping is even embedded in various recurrent stylistic devices, such as parentheses, interrogatives, and opening clauses like "Il semble que..." which attenuate the assertion which then follows. A characteristic device of Jaccottet is a series of approximations and corrections, such as this passage about light-effects:

...la lumière du matin ne ressemble pas au feu; moins encore à la lueur d'une lampe; elle n'est pas l'éclat d'un soleil juvénile, elle ne me fait pas penser aux dieux, pas davantage à une figure humaine, fût-elle sans tache, et très aimée. C'est bien plutôt (encore n'en parlerai-je pas sans l'offusquer), comme une propriété des choses, non pas leur vêtement, non pas le lin ni l'armure argentée, mais une transparence, une limpidité; et non pas seulement du ciel, mais de tout l'espace, montagnes très éloignées, suspendues en l'air, rares nuages à leur cime, puis les arbres, l'herbe, la terre, un tas de bois contre une maison; une allusion au cristal, plutôt que le cristal lui-même, qui n'étincelle que dans l'Alpe... (Prom, p.54)

The example is extreme rather than typical - it demonstrates very clearly what the author calls "une sorte de déblaiement des erreurs" (Prom, p.112) represented by these texts.

As we have already seen, the quest undertaken by Jaccottet is a quest both for a mystery or lost plenitude and also for an appropriate language. Lucidity of thought must be accompanied by clarity of expression; and so the style is generally taut, with occasional relaxations to permit the inspirations of "une sagesse, une justesse inconscientes" (Prom, p.111). The continual self-criticism is integral to the book as a whole, and not just to the one chapter of dialogue. It is consistent even that Jaccottet should reject most of his approximations:

...ces textes devront être par moi oubliés, laissés au moins en arrière (...) ils sont encore beaucoup trop embarrassés, bavards, prétentieux pour satisfaire

personne.<sup>97</sup>

La Promenade does not arrive; it starts again and again. But in it a young writer develops a style and reveals a personality that will produce further engaging prose-works, future uncertain journeys.

It is interesting, in passing, to relate Jaccottet's poetics to his views on the craft of translation, of which he has become a noted practitioner. Jaccottet does not, like some poets, translate an idiosyncratic selection of another author's work: on the contrary, his versions of Hölderlin, Ungaretti and Leopardi actually fill in the gaps left by other translators. He even makes such acclaimed poet-translators as Pound, Lowell and Roy Campbell look like amateurs. Jaccottet had by the age of thirty completed versions of Homer's Odyssey, Plato's Symposium, Mann's Tod in Venedig, of essays by Ungaretti, Mann, and G. Wälchli, and of complete novels from German and Italian; he was then beginning the enormous task of Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften.

His fullest discussion of this craft was made in 1966 on receipt of a German prize, where he spoke in favour of a modest, flexible translation that never forces or overstrains the language:

Jede grosse Dichtung hat ihren eigenen Ton (...) Über jede Theorie, jedes Vorurteil (...) hinaus war ich immer bemüht, den französischen Leser diesen Ton, diese Stimme hören zu lassen (...) wer das Licht

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97. Prom, p.112. Cf. his retrospective criticism of the book: "je le voudrais plus simple, moins sonore ou moins embarrassé selon les pages..." (Prom, pp.140-1)

erscheinen lassen will, der sollte in der Sprache des eigenen Schaffens, wie in der Sprache der bescheidenen Übertragung, so durchsichtig wie möglich bleiben. So<sup>98</sup> wird der Übersetzer (...) am Ende kaum sichtbar sein.

Of his various comments in French, two remarks made in 1955 are particularly striking. The first says bluntly: "l'esprit d'un poème est dans sa lettre (...) il faut donc traduire la lettre, à condition de ne pas oublier qu'elle est esprit".<sup>99</sup>

It is followed by this reflection:

Il faut que le traducteur s'efface on conservant toutes les ressources de son art et les richesses de sa passion créatrice. On devine que ce peut être là, pour un poète ou quelque écrivain que ce soit, une leçon qui dépasse les simples problèmes de traduction et peut féconder ensuite ses propres oeuvres. Il s'agit en effet d'une morale de style.<sup>100</sup>

It is clear that Jaccottet found some close similarities of attitude between the translator he was and the poet he tried to be. We may recall his statement already quoted that working on his early poems consisted mostly of "permettre à un courant de passer, enlever des obstacles, effacer des traces".<sup>101</sup> Poet and translator share the "morale de style" of which two essential principles are modesty and fidelity.

98. "Für die Unsichtbarkeit des Übersetzers" in the Jahrbuch des deutschen Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, Darmstadt, 1966. I quote from p.90, and translate thus: "Every great work of literature has its own tone. Outside of every theory or prejudice I always endeavoured to let the French reader hear this tone, this voice. The writer who wishes to let the light appear should remain as transparent as possible both in the style of his own creative work and in that of his modest translating. In that way the translator eventually becomes almost invisible".
99. In Gazette de Lausanne, 28-29 March 1955, p.10, in a review of Jouve's versions of Shakespeare. Cf. his criticisms of Armand Robin's Poésie non traduite in NRF, Jan. 1959, pp.124-6. The closest analogy I have found to these remarks comes from the English poet Michael Hamburger, who feels that his more literal translations of Hölderlin have been more faithful. (Preface to Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments, London, 1966.)
100. Ibid., loc. cit. My emphases.
101. In NRF, March 1976, p.67.

Further light on Jaccottet's activity as a translator comes from an interview he gave in 1974, where he says:

"J'ai pratiquement toujours choisi les livres que j'ai traduites, en fonction d'affinités nécessaires. Mais en faisant la part de la nécessité matérielle aussi, que exclut qu'on se consacre uniquement à des écrivains invendables".<sup>102</sup> He adds, however, that these affinities may not always have been advantageous to his own writings:

Le travail de traduction est à double tranchant. Il peut aider à perfectionner son instrument (...) Mais il risque bien davantage d'empiéter sur le domaine réservé de l'oeuvre personnelle (...) Et quelquefois, je me demande si je n'ai pas eu tort de me consacrer à des oeuvres qui m'étaient proches, donc qui m'envahissait d'autant plus profondément...<sup>103</sup>

One case he certainly had in mind was the fascination exercised on him by Musil's great novel, which he began to translate in about 1955, and which became the starting point for his next prose work, Eléments d'un songe.

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102. In Le Magazine littéraire, May 1974, p.53. This exercise of choice enabled his translating to be, in Clerval's words (p.10), "le prolongement de sa démarche de créateur".

103. Ibid. We have already seen how L'Ignorant benefited technically from Jaccottet's work on the Odyssey.

## DARKNESS AND LIGHT

The real achievement of L'Ignorant and La Promenade created problems for Jaccottet after 1956. The view he had expounded of the poet's task and inspiration was not an easy one to live out in practice, especially when his poetic muse seemed to forsake him. He feared he might become totally dependent on inspiration received in the past, "un fantôme qui ne cesserait de hanter les lieux où jadis il respira..." (El, p.159). To press forward in the task he had chosen, however, meant that he must face continuing doubt and anxiety, which might place in jeopardy all that he had fervently affirmed.

A need to explore his ideas in a more intellectual way, coupled with a break in his writing of poetry (which will be discussed presently) meant that Jaccottet's next two books are both in prose. They are among the weightiest of his works: Eléments d'un songe and L'Obscurité (récit), published both in 1961. They were completed together, probably late in 1960; but the reflective texts which form Eléments were mostly written in the late 1950's, and thus predate the fictional work.<sup>1</sup>

Eléments d'un songe is in many ways a successor to La Promenade: it is a grouping of texts, avowedly discontinuous, and yet united in the question they explore, that of the

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1... The fifth chapter of Eléments, "La Nuit des agneaux", was the earliest to appear in review (NRF, December 1957, pp. 1171-5). The fourth appeared in NRF September 1958, pp. 399-414; the sixth in Cahiers du Sud, November 1958, pp. 210-20; and most of the first chapter in NRF, November 1959, pp. 803-21. As for L'Obscurité, its last page states simply "1960".



dream of plenitude. This is very similar to the question of poetic inspiration which occupied the earlier book. And here again Jaccottet begins indirectly with a discussion of a dead author, in this case Robert Musil, whose work he knew and esteemed more than that of A.E.

He had first become interested in Musil while still in Lausanne, and read then parts of Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften.<sup>2</sup> In the late 1940's he read other books, translated fragments from them,<sup>3</sup> and even met Musil's widow. The passages that most attracted him were in the posthumous third book of Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften and the story "Die Amsel" from Nachlass zu Lebzeiten - passages where Musil describes the experience of receiving mysterious signs as if by chance: "Diese Zeichen deuten auf einen anderen, reineren, erfüllteren Zustand hin, oder genauer, auf eine Umkehrung unseres Verhältnisses zur Welt und zu den Menschen".<sup>4</sup> He felt a personal affinity with Musil's mystical dream, and in 1951 he declared the Austrian's long novel to be "l'oeuvre majeure de la littérature de langue allemande du vingtième siècle".<sup>5</sup>

Chapter one of Eléments was first published in 1959,<sup>6</sup> and

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2. So he said on receiving a German prize essentially for his translation of this work (Jahrbuch der deutschen Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung, Darmstadt, 1966, p.86).
  3. Pour l'art, Lausanne, Nov.-Dec. 1948, pp.12-13 and Sept.-Oct. 1949, p.5.
  4. Jaccottet in Jahrbuch der deutschen Akademie..., op.cit. p.87. In English: "These signs point to another state of greater purity and fulfilment, or more exactly, to a reversal in our relationship to the world and to men".
  5. In La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, 14 March 1961, p.1. Musil has indeed won the respect of many critics; but very few would agree with such a superlative.
  6. In NRF, Nov. 1959, pp.803-821, under the title "A partir de L'Homme sans Qualités. This did not include the last part of the chapter, El, pp.40-51.

reflects Jaccottet's deep involvement in the translating of Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften during the preceding two or three years. It is entitled "A partir du rêve de Musil", and invites the reader to reflect on Musil's dream of "das tausendjährige Reich", as pursued by the hero Ulrich and his sister Agathe. Jaccottet quickly dismisses other characters like Arnheim, Diotima, Tuzzi and Stumm von Bordwehr, who have important rôles in the early part of the novel, because Musil's chief concern in that part, the ironical portrayal of Vienna in 1913, touches him less deeply. It is not that he denies the brilliance of this treatment of the Empire Musil nicknames "Kakanien" (and which he could translate as "la Cacanie!"); but that he finds it all too convincing and all too fruitless. Musil's offhand title for book two, "Seinesgleichen geschieht", is rendered by Jaccottet as "Toujours la même histoire", a heading he had already used for one of his own essays.<sup>7</sup> What follows book two interests him much more - Musil's attempts to escape from that closed circle, attempts which prove unsuccessful as the characters never attain their paradise and the novel is left unfinished. Jaccottet's emphasis on this part accords naturally with his earnest wish to be positive - he is not given to destructive wit - but it is also a tenable approach to the Austrian's work: his key expression "without qualities" can be traced to the mystical writings of Meister Eckhart, who is quoted later in the book.<sup>8</sup> The satirical sections are thus consid-

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7. In NRF, Jan. 1964, pp.176-8. The German phrase (literally "Such things happen") is referred to again in Sem, p.20 (Nov. 1959), and the French one in El, p.149.

8. It is the "âne eigenschaft" of the German sermons, according to J. Schmidt in Ohne Eigenschaft, eine Erläuterung zu Musils Grundbegriff, Tübingen, 1975, pp.46-53.

ered as a "déblaiement" - of obstacles, illusions, and of "cet ordre imposé du dehors (tradition, lois, règlements) qui fait les hommes aisément qualifiables" (El, p.16), after which the two central characters can properly seek "une vie juste", une cohérence profonde", "un sens qui rende à leur vie sa densité, son unité" (El, pp.15, 16).

According to this view, the turning-point in the novel is the introduction of the character Agathe at the start of book three; and the most important incident before that is Ulrich's youthful passion for the Major's wife, which left him with memories of a strange ecstasy, an "other state" where separation is replaced by exaltation: "il n'y a pas de distinction réelle entre lui et le monde".<sup>9</sup> This experience resembles personal ones of Jaccottet, such as those mentioned in La Promenade as sources of poetic insight. Here he makes a point of denying that few people have them:

Comme à beaucoup d'entre nous (qui ne peuvent plus se fonder que sur ce qu'ils ont vécu en profondeur, cet Erlebnis serait-il peu de chose, et presque insaisissable), il reste (à Ulrich) le souvenir de rares instants de plénitude... (El, p.17)

Qui pourrait négliger pareille expérience, si elle est la seule qui semble compenser en nous la tentation du désespoir (et cela d'autant plus qu'elle est parfaitement commune)?<sup>10</sup>

And he adds immediately:

Il ne fait pas de doute que Musil a passé de longues années à la méditer; et peut-être est-ce en définitive la gravité scrupuleuse de cette méditation, conduite avec une sorte d'acharnement méthodique

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9. El, p.19, paraphrasing Musil, Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, p.128: "der Grossenunterscheid verlor sich... man war 'keinen Scheidungen des Menschentums mehr untertan'".

10. El, p.20. In the earlier version Jaccottet wrote "équilibrer" for "compenser" (NRF, Nov. 1959, p.808). The claim is repeated in Sem, p.21 (Nov. 1959) and El, pp.86 and 144.

par l'esprit le plus pénétrant et le plus exact, qui nous attache si fort à son oeuvre. (El, p.20)

Such remarks go a long way towards explaining the readability of Musil's huge fragment; Jaccottet is not really concerned with literary criticism, however, but with personal recognition. By concentrating on points of contact with his own reflections, he tends to portray the Austrian writer after his own image - as a dreamer preoccupied with rare ecstatic experiences and the hope of plenitude they offer. We are told, for example, of Musil's motif of renounced possession (El, pp.20-21), which played a role in L'Effraie and L'Ignorant; of Ulrich's sense of "enracinement dans le réel" (El, p.19), which resembles certain reflections in La Promenade; and of Musil's proposed "acceptation en quelque sorte provisoire des limites, le regard n'en demeurant pas moins aux aguets de l'illimité",<sup>11</sup> which seems close to Jaccottet's poetic stance. By drawing attention to these aspects of the novel, he is indirectly drawing the reader into his own spiritual world - so much so that the surprising two pages of his own nostalgic fervour interpolated into the exposition (pages 34-35) are entirely appropriate. And Jaccottet's indirect method works better here than in La Promenade, since Musil has none of A.E.'s disappointing facility, and can carry the discussion much further. Even the arguments about the ordering of Musil's final chapters<sup>12</sup> aid him by showing the openness of the questions raised, such as

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11. El, p.38. Clerval stresses the importance of this dichotomy (p.12): "La recherche d'Ulrich n'est si fascinante que parce qu'elle s'épuise à concilier l'inconciliable, à faire descendre l'utopie dans le monde délabré où nous vivons".

12. He airs these editorial problems without trying to solve them, and actually mis-spells the name of Ernst Kaiser.

the dilemma Ulrich feels between loving God and loving the world, or the wish to feed on the fire of mysticism without the narrow piety by which religions try to preserve it. All of these things make Musil a good subject for Jaccottet's opening chapter.

Without that first chapter Eléments d'un songe would be a different book, and a weaker one. Musil offers a fine example of perseverance in a utopian dream. He represents also a model of intellectual rigour and lucidity. Jaccottet was very impressed by this, and called Musil's novel (in a note of 1957 accompanying an extract from his translation in progress): "l'un des plus admirables antidotes que l'on puisse prescrire contre la grossièreté, l'imprécision et la facilité contemporaines". Musil was, he said, "l'un des esprits les plus exigeants de son époque" and even "une sorte de saint de l'intelligence".<sup>13</sup>

It may even be that Jaccottet was swayed too much by this, that it drew him away from the intuitive side of his nature. He could commend Musil's emphasis on reasoned analysis: "il n'a jamais cru que les problèmes oppressants, meurtriers, de notre temps puissent être résolus, ou seulement analysés, en renonçant aux droits d'une raison lucide".<sup>14</sup> But Musil's verbose essayism, his "Germanic" heaviness and his tendency to scepticism could not be entirely good for Jaccottet as a poet. It may be no coincidence that when writing Eléments and L'Obscurité he felt "encombré de trop de paroles, de trop de pensées, de trop de doutes".<sup>15</sup>

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13. In NRF, Nov. 1957, pp.861 and 858-9.

14. Loc.cit., p.859.

15. Prom, p.143 (note of 1961). Cf El, pp.148-9, 187.

But whether or not it was wholly beneficial, Musil's influence cannot be said to be very great. Certainly, he confirmed Jaccottet's interest in certain questions and reinforced his belief in their importance. But although Jaccottet knew of him even before going to Paris, Musil probably played no rôle in the formation of his personal themes. And in La Promenade, where Jaccottet is not secretive about his debts, Musil rates only a brief mention.<sup>16</sup>

Even for the period 1957-1960 he may be considered as more a pretext than an inspiration - as one critic puts it:

"l'apport de Musil à ces Eléments d'un songe ne paraît nullement déterminant".<sup>17</sup> Jaccottet's personal reservations

are indeed stated early on: "il est des oeuvres auxquelles je suis plus intimement attaché" (El, p.11), or in the

earlier version: "bien que Musil ne soit pas de ceux que j'aime par-dessus tout".<sup>18</sup> This places Musil on a lower

rank in his affection than Rilke and Hölderlin. But having said that, he could rightly affirm, of the central movement

of Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften: "il est venu alimenter mes propres interrogations".<sup>19</sup> Jacques Borel puts it this way,

16. Prom, pp.112-5. Jaccottet could conceivably have been loth to discuss him until the French translation was available. But later references are equally rare: Sem, pp.20, 45 (1959-60 only); Pay, p.162; Jou, pp.10, 30; L'Entretien des Muses, p.41; Rilke par lui-même, p.5. The exception is Jaccottet's minor essay Autriche (1966): his view of Austria is strongly marked by Musil, "qui n'est par tendre pour elle" (p.113).

17. Marc Alyn in La Table ronde, Feb. 1962, p.120. Clerval (p.87) would not quite agree; but he seems to think, mistakenly, that Musil is still the point de départ for the later chapters.

18. In NRF, Nov. 1959, p.803.

19. Loc.cit., p.804. The final text (El, p.12) changes this to the more tentative: "il semblait proche de certaines de mes interrogations propres".

in his extended review: "il cherche, à travers l'oeuvre de Musil, à lire les signes qui lui permettraient de vérifier la profondeur de son expérience personnelle".<sup>20</sup> Musil is thus best seen as a support for Jaccottet, rather than a direct influence on him - and the poet of L'Ignorant was hardly self-confident enough to refuse support of this quality.

The last section of "A partir du rêve de Musil" (E1, p.40-51) did not appear in the 1959 version, and may be treated as a separate text, being linked to what precedes only by the theme of the utopian dream. Here Jaccottet exposes the misery caused by the degradation of this dream into vulgar escapism: it is the case-study of an adolescent girl he calls "la princesse exilée", presumably a real person he knew in Grignan,<sup>21</sup> who attempted suicide because her hopes had no contact with reality. He makes in passing various satirical points, not particularly reminiscent of Musil, about romantic movies and glossy magazines - "bibles de l'irréel, montrant des visages d'actrices (de saintes?) sur lesquels les marques de la peine et du temps sont toujours soigneusement effacées" (E1, p.45) - which he denounces as "de grossiers rêves, dépourvus de toute vérité, auxquels on ne croit peut-être même pas, mais que l'on avale comme une drogue" (E1, p.41). These, in his view, "ne sont pas de vrais rêves, ténébreux, striés d'éclairs, mais une beauté morte, fausse, le dernier résidu, imbécile et menson-

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20. In Critique, no.180 (1962), p.412.

21. He speaks later (E1, pp.146, 149) of the numerous sorry stories he could tell "maintenant que je vis depuis quelques années dans ce bourg", and of the effects of the mass media on girls in general, even in country villages (Sem, pp.114-6, Aug. 1966).

ger, de quelque chose qui fut d'abord pur et vibrant" (E1, p.47). And he sketches all too credibly the real meanness and misery which these dreams ignore, and which cannot be cured either by priests or pundits.<sup>22</sup> His picture of the girl, pessimistic though it is, certainly rings true, and through her case Jaccottet is restating his own central problems of reality and despair: "Ce n'était pas le ciel qu'il lui aurait fallu, mais la terre seulement un peu éclairée et l'air plus frais, et pouvoir passer sans horreur dans la boue..." (E1, p.51).

The other nine chapters of Eléments are diverse both in content and in style. The author's ideal structure for the book would have been a "suite de variations presque sans rptures" (E1, p.7), but he admits his failure to attain this, claiming only that they share the same point de départ. Three of the short chapters resemble the "Exemples" of La Promenade, except that they are concerned more with people and less with landscape. These do not call for very much comment.

"Le Conseil des eaux" is the most poetic of them: a brief scene of happy lovers, recalling the parenthesis of

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22. In his view, today's "nouveaux confesseurs", adept at psychoanalytical jargon, "presque toujours n'offrent pour remède qu'une sottise sage au près de laquelle le pire chagrin semble un havre" (E1, p.50). The remarks of Clerval (pp.87-8) bear on this point: "La faim d'absolu qui sommeille en tout homme se satisfait souvent à vil prix; s'accommodant, trop aisément, des bassesses de la réalité, elle prend prétexte de la laideur sans remède qui sévit dans le monde, pour chercher dans l'évasion à bon marché procurée par les marchands d'illusion (...) un leurre ou un baume médiocre".



pages 34-35. Here the beloved is addressed in the second person, and the rain all around gives the moment a special beauty: "un mouvement invisible nous entraînait vers l'invisible" (El, p.56). But the fragility of it all is evident in the fine illogical phrase: "nous nous aimions parce que le bonheur de l'amour est impossible" (El, p.56). And the following text shows an even more precarious happiness: it begins like a romantic tale of pursuit and mysterious discovery, set in the woods near Grignan, but is suddenly broken short by alarm and horror. The narrator then admits it was only a dream, but claims that it proceeded from reality, from Homer's "gates of horn" which trumpet forth the truth: "nous voilà, malgré notre bonheur, culbutés dans l'inquiétude, l'appréhension de la souffrance" (El, pp.66-67). Later comes an even more imaginative text, "La Nuit des agneaux". Probably the first to be written, this chapter bears some resemblance to the writings of A.E., as Jacques Masui pointed out.<sup>23</sup> It deals with the "illusions merveilleuses" of a moonlit night, visions of travelling souls, and with the words of advice they might or ought to have received, "s'ils voulaient pouvoir passer sans périr jusqu'à l'entrebâillement des portes du jour" (El, p.103). Here Jaccottet touches on some thoughts about the acceptance of uncertainty and the avoidance of extremes, thoughts which are better developed elsewhere in Eléments. Indeed these short chapters could have been omitted without detriment to the book, although they do add to its variety of tone.

The fourth and sixth chapters, both published in review

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23. It appeared in the NRF, Dec. 1957, pp.1171-5, and Masui mentioned it in Cahiers du Sud, Jan. 1958, p.140.

in 1958,<sup>24</sup> are more substantial. The former is a sort of theological reflection, and displays Jaccottet's dualistic way of thinking from its very title: "A la longue plainte de la mer, un feu répond". There is dialogue in it, literally, between a man and a woman, who are staying with a baby in a house on the Mediterranean coast. This couple resembles those on earlier pages, and is presumably based on the author and his wife - Jaccottet does not really fictionalize the narrator - but he may also have had in mind Musil's "Holy Conversations" between Ulrich and Agathe.<sup>25</sup> The theme, however, is more reminiscent of Hölderlin: the loss of paradise and the absence of God. Starting from the woman's sense of fear and menace, the narrator explores the feeling of estrangement from a past plenitude, and wonders about those traces of it that men have perceived:

... que sont donc, en définitive, ces feux dont nul ne peut nier qu'ils se soient allumés plus ou moins brusquement et avec plus ou moins d'intensité au cours des âges? D'où tirent-ils cette puissance qui, quelquefois, vient encore expirer à nos pieds, tels la dernière vague ou le dernier pétale de la mer? Et d'où leur vient cette faiblesse irritante qui empêche aucun d'eux de triompher définitivement et de changer une bonne fois la vie? (El, p.78)

He cannot and will not ignore the questions they pose, since

Tous ces signes, si différents puissent-ils être, convergent vers l'affirmation d'une possibilité inouïe, merveilleuse; d'une énigme qui est à la fois notre effroi et notre espoir. (El, p.79)

The explanations given by established religion, however, are rejected in this text, as they were by Musil's characters. Jaccottet says here, as elsewhere, that religious dogma is never true or faithful to the essentially

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24. NRF, Sept.1958, pp.399-414 and Cahiers du Sud, Nov. 1959, pp.210-20.

25. Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, pp.762-788. These include a summary of the message of the mystics (pp.769-70) and

mysterious experiences of fire and renewal. He cannot be satisfied with the language used by ministers of religion when talking of the things of God: "répétant comme une morne leçon ce qui fut proféré d'abord dans la tempête".<sup>26</sup> For his own part, he writes: "j'imaginai qu'il devait y avoir une autre possibilité d'en parler" (E1, p.85). And in the latter half of the text he develops his ethic of fervent vigilance", notre patient, silencieux et fidèle amour", which cannot attain to theological certainty, but nevertheless makes possible a few affirmations. "Peut-être n'est-il pas tout à fait impossible de parler de l'insaisissable", he concludes, perhaps one can find strength to "opposer à la mer illimitée des plaintes un seul baiser, une aile, une plume, un peu de paille" (E1, pp.94, 95).

This summary does poor justice to a very fluent piece of writing, Jaccottet's finest, at that date, in the reflective mode. It exposes various of his central themes in a manner that justifies the phrase "negative theology" which some critics have applied to his thought,<sup>27</sup> since the narrator draws no distinction between his own glimpses of "l'insaisissable" and what others call experiences of the divine. And it succeeds in giving artistic and symbolic

25.(contd) a rejection of established religion (p.782).

26. E1, p.77. Jaccottet's unpleasant memories of various Swiss pastors colour this passage, and are mentioned also in Jou, p.33 (May 1971).

27. Notably P. Broome: "Philippe Jaccottet's 'Negative Theology'" in the Australian Journal of French Studies, I, 1968, pp.121-132. In Paysages, p.168, Jaccottet says he is unhappy with the phrase. The poet Yves Bonnefoy accepts its application to his work.

presentation of these themes, through constant reference to an elemental landscape - a less realistic landscape than that of Grignan, but a more universal one - which, as the narrator says, helps him in his affirmations (El, p.95). To Clerval (p.89) this is "l'un des plus beaux, parmi les contes allégoriques recueillis dans Eléments d'un songe". Although at times the style is too pretentious (for example in the title), Jaccottet's use of heightened diction generally provides a strength to support his earnest tone; and one central passage (pages 83-84) is incandescent.

"Devant l'ombre maltraitée", first called "Songeries en face d'un ombre",<sup>28</sup> is a study in human misery like the case of the "princesse exilée" of pages 41-51. A much grimmer study, however, since the person concerned, dying in a Paris hospital after a road accident, was a mere shadow: "un petit homme malingre, pitoyable, obscur, pauvrement vêtu, sans force, sans courage; n'importe qui, vraiment..." (El, p.110).

The author had not seen death so close before, and his main reason for watching this doomed man was to test his own power of hope: "Que pouvait donc signifier, au chevet de cet homme malmené l'idée que j'avais nourrie parfois, d'un passage aisé dans la mort?"<sup>29</sup> In this text, death appears

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28. Cahiers du Sud, Nov. 1958, pp.210-220. It was written, presumably, during that year, since it refers to Jaccottet's stay on Majorca, reported also in Sem. p.11 - a visit which may well have provided the setting for the text just discussed, "A la longue plainte..."

29. El, p.111. This refers back to La Promenade and L'Ignorant, above all to "Le Livre des morts", which itself asked the question: "mais si la / mort était vraiment là comme il le faudra une fois, / où seront les images, les subtils penses, la foi / préservée à travers la longue vie?" (P/I, p.91).

as an invisible machine of terror, or an unnameable stain of blood (El, pp.110, 120), provoking horror and nausea; and it seems to make mockery of Jaccottet's attempts at combatting or counterbalancing - "A ce fouet qui frappait, n'aurais-je à opposer jamais d'autre défense que des souffles, des parfums? (p.119). He considers in turn the image of the dying Christ, the glowing landscape of Majorca, and the ecstatic verses of John of the Cross; but these exploratory digressions only intensify the feeling of unease. Then he returns to imagine what memories the dying man might have of his careworn life - this is a passage of deep pity and pessimism which says that for the common people "les péripéties du chagrin sont interchangeables".<sup>30</sup> The author actually apologizes for its sombreness, which is a betrayal of his own principles: "je m'étais dit souvent que la parole ne devait servir qu'à éclairer...", a betrayal caused by his own doubts, "...toujours me reprenait la crainte que cette clarté ne fût vide, fallacieuse..." (El, p.126).

The conclusion of this chapter is that a state of tension exists unresolved:

Portant un faible feu sur les bords de cet abîme  
où un homme, n'importe qui, s'engouffre ou s'enlise,  
et me demandant si ce feu éclaire l'abîme ou si  
l'abîme l'éteint, je crois constater que ni l'un ni  
l'autre ne se produit. Quoique menacé dangereusement,  
le feu s'acharne, se perpétue; quoique par éclairs  
apparemment franchi, l'abîme dure et demeure impéné-  
trable". (El, p.128)

In this case the image of suffering is very strong, stronger than those of Majorca or of the Alpine valley on the final page, and it announces the depiction of despair in L'Obscurité. It bears witness to a graver, maturer Jaccottet,

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30. El, p.124. He makes it clear later on (p.146) that he is not thinking of Parisians alone.

endeavouring to confront his ideas with the experiences of ordinary people around him, as he had not done in La Promenade.

The last chapters of Eléments, from "Poursuite" onwards, recall the "Remarques sans fin" of the previous book, since they concentrate more on the problems of poetry, which had been present less conspicuously in the earlier parts.

Jaccottet speaks of his impulse to write in these terms:

J'ai envie de parler, peut-être sans savoir pourquoi, peut-être parce que je sens que j'ai touché la merveille, et qu'il me faut le dire aux autres pour qu'ils cessent de désespérer. Mais je ne peux parler n'importe comment (...) le langage commun ne suffira pas. (El, p.137)

The miracle in question is his recurrent experience of plenitude, called here "une mesure", "le pas d'un dieu", "un chant" or simply "un lieu",<sup>31</sup> which descriptions and abstractions cannot convey adequately: either they make it seem otherworldly - whereas Jaccottet, like Musil's Ulrich, feels "rapproché des choses" (El, p.138) - or else their assurance betrays this "expérience dont quelques-uns des aspects essentiels étaient la fragilité et l'obscurité, le manque d'appuis, la solitude, une ombre d'effroi sur le bonheur" (El, pp.142-3). He insists that his concern is with poetic inspiration, not with theology or metaphysics, and at the same time that poetic inspiration is not a matter of mere words but of existential hope:

la seule chose qui résistât au doute, au désespoir, pour nous, il fallait que ce fût l'incompréhensible, une énigme essentiellement énigme, mais qui nous apparaissait plutôt, en fin de compte, comme la seule

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31. El, pp.135, 136, and 147. Of "le pas d'un dieu", Jaccottet says later "c'était peut-être trop en dire" (p.163). However, "il n'est pas aisé d'interpréter sans emphase et sans imprécision une expérience si profonde et si dérobée..." (p.158).

ouverture, la seule porte, la seule vraie source...<sup>32</sup>

It is because of the enduring mystery of these experiences that they give rise to poetry. They are always renewed,

comme une première rencontre que ménagerait éternellement la surprise, l'émerveillement de la première rencontre...<sup>33</sup>

And they are common occurrences, although it is uncommon for poems to do them justice.

This passage is a fuller and clearer exposé of Jaccottet's experiences of inspiration than any earlier ones - and he seems to have found it too clear, not sufficiently uncertain, since he switches to a dialogue-form, as used in the title-chapter of La Promenade,<sup>34</sup> to allow the objections of "le douteur" within him. He willingly concedes that his "textes de recherche" are disappointing and artificial; but these problems are partly due to a hostile environment. He expounds then at unaccustomed length his condemnation of modern society, and in particular his revulsion at the mass media:

...jamais la parole n'a été plus maltraitée qu'aujourd'hui. Avant de périr par la faute de telles ou telles radiations, nous aurons péri dans un déluge de paroles immondes ou le faux ne se distingue plus du vrai.  
(p.150)

Bavardage de spectres, pas même, de poupées; pis encore: bavardage des hommes du XXe siècle, terrorisés, pleins d'impudeur et de sottise, d'assurance et de confusion, condamnés au chaos... (El, p.151)

This is a very negative view, asserted as if it were self-evident, and elsewhere taken for granted by Jaccottet. It is expressed more strongly in this book than in his others,

32. El, pp.147-8. This repeats the statement of p.35 that incomprehensibility is a promise and a safeguard. We can recognize Jaccottet's favoured image of an opening in a wall.

33. El, p.144. These phrases are italicized by the author, as were similar ones on p.84.

34. Prom, pp.95-101, where the doubter was simply called

perhaps because of its contact with Musil; but it had been part of his attitudes since his youth, as we have already seen. Here Jaccottet gives the falseness of modern society as a reason for his own loss of poetic inspiration:

...je suis privé du chant, exilé du chant, c'est-à-dire terriblement tristement éloigné de la réalité du monde. Chaque jour, notre temps déverse entre elle et moi une masse d'abstractions et d'immondices à travers lesquelles je n'avance plus qu'à grand'peine... (El, p.155)

And he takes this opportunity to affirm the importance of true poetry:

la meilleure réponse qu'on nous ait été donnée à toutes les espèces de questions que nous ne cessons de nous poser, est l'absence de réponse du poème... (El, p.152)

...le monde seulement apparaît avec la beauté des choses du monde qui n'est pas une beauté sans tache, et sa réponse est ce chant où la question continue d'être posée, mais où elle est comme portée par un souffle, allégée; sa réponse est seulement sa présence chantante, mesurée, et c'est elle que le poème traduit ou simplement répète. (El, p.154)

One cannot say that poetry is The Answer - "le salut, la 'gardienne de l'Etre'".<sup>35</sup> Yet while rejecting such pretentious claims, Jaccottet does not conceal his sympathy with them. Poetry is a game, but it is not always nothing but a game:

peut-être la définition la moins inexacte de la poésie serait-elle celle qui embrasserait ces contraires, qui l'envisagerait à la fois comme un jeu insignifiant et comme un témoignage du secret, une façon légère qu'aurait le secret de nous parvenir... (El, p.158)

After the affirmations of this text, the concluding sections of the book are less satisfactory. In attempting

34. (contd) "l'autre".

35. El, p.158. Without quoting directly, this phrase calls to mind some nineteenth-century views on the rôle of poetry, like those of Mallarmé. Cf Sem, p.42 (March 1960): "Ceux qui manient la parole sont plus près de Dieu".



to sum up, Jaccottet tends to express reservations about what he has already said, and his concern to mix his reflections with observations of reality, while adding to the poetic truth of his texts, makes for greater fragmentariness.

"Dieu perdu dans l'herbe", the last substantial chapter, considers again the poet's attitude to religion, discussed before in "A la longue plainte..." The gods, says Jaccottet, are perhaps "la forme plus ou moins fidèlement donnée par les hommes à une expérience comparable à celle qu'il m'était arrivé de faire en poésie"; in which case "chaque divinité est à la fois manifestation et trahison de l'énigme..." (El, p.164). He cannot join the sceptics in dismissing religious experiences as illusions of the past. But he cannot speak of God either - that would be to betray his uncertainties - he must speak instead of "l'Insaisissable", "le Silencieux" or "le Sans Nom" (pp.165-6); he must try to invent:

le chant de l'absence qui n'en est pas une, la  
musique de l'arrivée à une extrême limite, la  
respiration de qui se trouve sur un rivage au-delà  
duquel s'étale à l'infini un abîme qui est encore,  
en dépit de tout, autre chose qu'un abîme...<sup>36</sup>

Thus, in a tone of constant questioning, Jaccottet sets himself a task which must be continually recommenced. He has made little obvious progress from the conclusions of La Promenade: there is here the same ethic of fidelity, patience, self-effacement and moderation, "la sérénité d'une

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36. El, p.171. A similar image of peril, used at the end: "Exposés sur les montagnes du coeur" (p.188), is quoted from Rilke's poem of 1914 "Ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens" - of this Jaccottet later remarked that, paradoxically, "réduit à peu, il était plus puissant qu'en ses moments d'heureuse abondance" (Rilke par lui-même, p.121).

attente inexprimable.<sup>37</sup> Yet Eléments d'un songe, for all its unevenness, is a richer work, and a more substantial achievement. It is the most sustained of all Jaccottet's books, and its style is not often marred by the disruptive parentheses and the needless self-consciousness of its predecessor.<sup>38</sup> The later prose-work Paysages surpasses it in style, and perhaps in structure; but there is a directness of voice in Eléments which the author has seldom equalled since, as Michel Deguy predicted in 1961.<sup>39</sup> Jacques Borel put it this way: "l'auteur entend faire part (...)D'où sans doute ce ton lisse, grave, égal, cette respiration sereine, cette écriture transparente et qui a le constant souci de transmettre quelque chose".<sup>40</sup> And above all, there is a noble intensity, maintained by a determined avoidance of triviality - this prompted one reviewer to declare: "personne ne demeurera insensible à la dignité nostalgique, austère et frémissante de cette méditation".<sup>41</sup>

At the same time that Eléments was published in 1961, a rather different book of Jaccottet's appeared: L'Obscurité, written essentially in 1960. This is a unique work from his pen, because of its fictional form, and because of its extreme sombreness.

37. El, p.173. Cf. pp.171, 160, 106.

38. These faults are most apparent on pages 164-5 and 177-9. Elsewhere such tendencies are but unobtrusive features of the author's personal style.

39. In NRF, Dec. 1961, p.1100.

40. In Critique, no.180 (1962), p.414.

41. G. Piroué in Mercure de France, March 1962, p.698.

It remains his only work of fiction, and may loosely be called a novel. In fact it is thin in narrative and characterization, full of philosophical speculation, and largely autobiographical; but so are many novels, and in the days of Robbe-Grillet (or of Aragon) there is little point in denying them the appellation "roman". The designation Jaccottet preferred to give it is "récit", a term suggesting a simpler and tighter structure, and fewer characters and events, than are found in most novels.<sup>42</sup>

Jaccottet had always been interested, as a critic and translator, in prose fiction: his version of Der Tod in Venedig appeared as early as 1947. But typically he values in it not so much the narrative skill as the poetic tones and insights. Thus in his prefatory note on Thomas Mann he wrote:

Tout ce qu'il y a d'habilités narratives, de subtilités psychologiques ou de réflexions dans La Mort à Venise, me paraîtrait peu de chose, n'était cette musique à quoi je prête l'oreille, secrète et s'exaltant jusqu'à la fin...<sup>43</sup>

In a similar vein, Eléments d'un songe commends the "bad novel-writing" of Musil, who abandons most of his plot and characters in the latter parts of Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften. Jaccottet's own "Fragments d'un récit", which appeared in L'Effraie (pp.39-43) were certainly more fragmentary than narrative; and in 1956 he declared himself "incapable du moindre récit".<sup>44</sup> We must suppose that L'Obscurité was con-

42. To Gide, for example, La Porte étroite was a "récit" and Les Faux-Monnayeurs a "roman" - Jaccottet seems to accept this usage.

43. Th. Mann, La Mort à Venise, Mermod, Lausanne, 1947, p.15.

44. Domaine Suisse, Oct.-Nov. 1956, p.64. In an interview in Gazette de Lausanne, 17-18 Dec. 1955, he said: "Quand je dis que je ne songe pas à écrire des romans, cela ne signifie pas que ce genre d'oeuvres me soit indifférent

ceived after the earlier parts of Eléments, perhaps as an offshoot of them; and that the author never wished to place the emphasis on plot or character.

The story-line of this "récit" is indeed a simple one, involving only two characters. It may be presented in chronological sequence as follows:

A certain man, after a happy childhood and a good education, had acquired, while still quite young, a reputation as a brilliant thinker. At the age of thirty (or a little older) he spent some months travelling around Europe in pursuit of a Russian actress who did not love him. One day a younger man sees him hurrying from a reception, at which he is guest of honour, to meet this girl at a café, where she gives her final refusal to marry him. Shortly afterwards the younger man becomes his friend and disciple, and learns that he remembers the love-affair with melancholy pleasure. Later he marries a worthy woman, and withdraws to the country. There the younger man stays with them for two months, before going for three years to a distant country, where he puts into practice much of his master's teaching. During his absence, however, the older man abandons his wife and son, and hides away in a squalid corner of the city. The younger man, on his return, seeks him out there, and spends a night listening to his monologue of despair, in which all that once gave him happiness is dismissed as worthless. The young man then leaves, wondering how to account for this capitulation. And the older man dies.

That is Jaccottet's narrative material. In L'Obscurité, however, it is not treated chronologically: it is narrated in the first person by the younger man, and begins with his return from abroad and his search for the man he calls "mon maître". Most of the earlier incidents are told quickly as memories, and indeed a lot of the story is dealt with - wasted, one might think - in the first four pages. The fiction is clearly only a pretext for the reflective material which dominates the book: in the first half, the master's monologue in

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44.(contd) en soi". Compare the recent admissions: "Jamais (...) je n'ai été hanté par des personnages, par une histoire, comme le romancier" (NRF, March 1976, p.63), and "totale incapacité d'inventer une histoire" (Jou, p.27, May 1971).

the darkened room; and in the second half, the narrator's attempts to make sense of the case, his "post-mortem" in effect (although the master's death is not actually stated until the final page).

Jaccottet further restricts the elements of fiction by not inventing names for people and places, thereby permitting the reader to set the events in the present (there is reference to a recent war), and to think of the city as Paris. Given the first-person narration in a style recognizable as Jaccottet's own, one readily identifies the younger man as the author, then aged 35, though admittedly not back from any stay abroad.<sup>45</sup>

The character of the master is not pure fiction either. Clerval reports<sup>46</sup> that he is based in part on an esteemed figure who taught Classics at Lausanne. Another model for the character is perhaps Gustave Roud, whose influence (like the master's) Jaccottet describes as "un rayonnement".<sup>47</sup>

But really the character is a composite one, such as could be suggested to the author by various of the "vies que j'ai vu se dérouler tout près de moi depuis mon enfance, qui me parurent d'abord presque héroïques, brillantes en tout cas, et qui s'achèvent dans la détresse sans recours de la maladie. Hommes qui furent si sûrs d'eux, si pleins de vanité pour de vagues honneurs, et qui s'effondrent, piteux".<sup>48</sup>

45. The narrator says at the end that he is "au milieu de ma vie" (Obs, p.169).

46. Clerval, p.8. He probably means André Bonnard, unless it is the other dedicatee of the Odyssey translation, Carl Stammelbach. The master at one point quotes from Latin or Greek (Obs, p.66).

47. Domaine Suisse, Oct.-Nov. 1956, p.63. And later in Gustave Roud, p.11. The master's teachings resemble those of Roud in some details, notably the idea of "les signes" (Obs, p.49).

48. Sem, p.99 (April 1966).

In a deeper sense the model for the master is the author himself. That may seem odd for a character aged about fifty;<sup>49</sup> but his country retreat bears close resemblance to Grignan, and above all his reflections are Jaccottet's own, no mere fictional hypotheses. Jacques Borel recognized that immediately, declaring in his review: "le jeune homme (est) sans doute un des visages du poète lui-même, le maître, aussi bien, étant un autre de ses visages, et comme sa face la plus périlleuse".<sup>50</sup> In other words, the master is an imagined older self subject to the author's own doubts and impelled by reason to take a step he feared he himself might take, a step we may call "philosophical suicide".<sup>51</sup>

To explain why Jaccottet should project himself in this way seems difficult, at least at first. He had always sought to write positively, to avoid nihilism - and indeed his narrator says: "nous étions convenus de ne jamais rien rajouter au malheur humain par aucune plainte" (*Obs*, p.87). Shortly afterwards Jaccottet said he was "impatient de me voir retomber dans les jérémiades à quoi excellent nos contemporains".<sup>52</sup>

The theme of anxiety, as we have seen, had been with him

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49. No exact figure is stated. The narrator says their difference in age is "une dizaine d'années" (*Obs*, p.18) - but some passages make it seem to be much more (pp.45, 99).

50. *Critique*, No.180 (1962), p.410. Likewise Michel Deguy speaks of "deux personnages qui sont l'auteur dédoublé" (*NRF*, Dec.1961, p.1097).

51. The book's account of his death is not calculated to satisfy a coroner or pathologist. Illness is denied (*Obs*, p.77); so clearly it is self-inflicted, perhaps by some sort of autosuggestion. In *Ver*, p.41, Jaccottet speaks of "le suicide, souvent logique".

52. *Prom*, p.145, note of 1961. *L'Obscurité* is the chief work referred to there as his "tristes récits" - and indeed its last chapters themselves express that impatience.

since the start of his career, since the adolescent experiences which inspired "Pour les Ombres". The duality between darkness and light was common in all his writings, which often supposed that darkness (or misery) is pervasive, while concentrating on the lights or fires (of hope) that may be perceived in that darkness. The moments of serenity evoked in L'Ignorant, for example, are understood to be few and fragile, precarious episodes in a continuing "Combat inégal".

Of particular relevance to L'Obscurité is the view of urban misery found in certain poems of 1950-52, such as "Débris",<sup>53</sup> and in a note of 1954 where Jaccottet describes the dusty buildings of Montparnasse where he had lived: "ce décor où tout semblait se concerter pour me donner le sentiment d'être 'au plus bas'".<sup>54</sup> The nocturnal shouts and wails he heard there made his view of the common condition no rosier, and provided the material for the scenes of the master's hideout in L'Obscurité.<sup>55</sup>

The central problem of the book, however, is the master's "philosophical suicide". The earliest hints of this in Jaccottet's work date from 1956. He wrote in La Promenade:

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53. L'Ignorant, pp.14-15, in the section "Dans les rues d'une ville".

54. NRF, March 1954, p.560.

55. This hideout is said to be in a part of town the narrator used to know (pp.23-4). The story of the imprisoned René on pp.41-44 is based on a true case to which Jaccottet referred in La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, 20 June 1951, p.1: "l'homme qui habite là devient ainsi, pour moi qui ne peux pas le voir, un chien à voix d'homme, enfermé là et riant bassement". A similar decor is evoked in "Devant l'ombre maltraitée": "ces grands immeubles noirs de Paris que je connaissais bien pour y avoir vécu à côté des plus médiocres destinées" (El, p.121).

...il suffirait de regarder la vie sous un certain angle pour sombrer définitivement dans l'épouvante (...) J'en vins même à me dire que la considération simplement honnête et attentive du réel devait fatalement conduire à la folie...<sup>56</sup>

The reasoning of the master can be viewed as an extension of that "certain angle" of looking. In La Promenade also, Jaccottet included a short dialogue between a negative and a positive voice,<sup>57</sup> of which L'Obscurité is in some ways a fictionalized development: a book-length dialogue between the master and the narrator, a two-part debate about despair.

These antecedents are not, however, adequate explanations for the work's genesis. In that matter we cannot overlook the author's note of June 1961, appended to the second edition of La Promenade, at page 143. There he discloses that after the completion of L'Ignorant he underwent a "crisis of capacity", in which a sort of "enchantement maléfique" prevented him from writing any complete poems - and that prose-writing was no real substitute:

...mais je ne pouvais m'empêcher de poursuivre, de persévérer dans ces détours: considérant avec chagrin l'obscurité grandissante qui finirait peut-être par effacer toute trace; envisageant, pour la première fois, que l'on pût définitivement s'y perdre.

The phrase "pour la première fois" claims that he was significantly more despairing than ever before, and the final words allude to the fate of master. We may infer that it was the extent of this crisis that made Jaccottet turn to fiction, and we may suggest that L'Obscurité was written as a form of exorcism. Clerval (p.74) puts it this way: "Dans ce récit

56. Prom, pp.137-8 (note of 30 Aug.1956). Cf. these phrases from "Le Livre des morts" (P/I, pp.89, 91): "il n'est de fin qu'en l'immobile peur" and "la frousse du corps aux abois..."

57. Prom, pp.95-101. El, pp.148-158 is more directly analogous.



(...) Jaccottet conjure, en l'approfondissant, l'une de ses tentations". And the author himself declares: "Tout ce que j'ai écrit durant ces quatre années ne fut que pour éviter la perte d'un chemin, l'oubli d'une clarté..."<sup>58</sup> Important as those disclosures are, they don't say how close he might have come to suicide. Nor do they reveal which part of the period 1956-60 was the darkest for him, though we would expect the loss of inspiration to have hurt more deeply as "Le Livre des morts" receded further into the past. Eléments d'un songe has its share of darkness, and its most sombre passages tend to be late ones, such as this reference to the personal crisis:

...pourquoi ai-je écrit ces textes qui ne me satisfont qu'à moitié et qui, au lieu de chanter, poursuivent la possibilité du chant? Parce que je suis privé du chant, exilé du chant... (El, p.155)

or these pessimistic words from the conclusion:

"Pensées" sur la fin des dieux, sur l'amour qui change, la vie qui se retire, le souffle faiblissant de la poésie: "pensées" sur la cendre. (El, p.187)

Those were written in 1960; but "Devant l'ombre maltraitée" dates from 1958, as does this passage from "A la longue plainte":

Aujourd'hui nous sommes aveuglés parce que, de nos plus affreux songes, l'obscurité hostile semble avoir envahi les jours, et comme l'encre de la seiche avoir teinté de noir toute la mer. Les terreurs qui étaient enfouies en eux jusqu'ici, et que l'aube venait dissiper d'un léger mouvement d'ailes, de plumes, en très grande foule ont envahi les rues, les corridors, les chemins éclairés. Ouvrir les yeux, allumer la lampe ne suffit plus à les chasser.<sup>59</sup>

That could almost serve as epigraph for L'Obscurité: the

58. Quoting still from the note of June 1961 (Prom, p.143).

59. El, p.80. The image of the cuttlefish is used again in Obs, p.69.

gloomy world-view and the bitter tone are all there.

The first half of the book shows best the benefits gained from the fictional mode. The mystery of the master's behaviour gives suspense to the exposition, and directs attention to his explanation of himself. And the setting of the hideout surrounds his words with a suitable atmosphere: a small and dingy room with a dusty window during a long winter night - with the darkest words kept for the blackest of the small hours. The evocation of the master's fellow-tenants is particularly effective, and contributes directly to the theme of the uselessness of life: "ces êtres tellement plus laids que les plus déshérités des animaux(...) on dirait qu'il n'y a pas eu de jour où ils n'aient été maltraités, insultés, souillés..." (Obs, p.38). Without this fictional presentation, the master's monologue could more easily be dismissed as morbid pessimism: with it, the reader is held against his will and subjugated - like the narrator, whose objections the master keeps anticipating.

The master's words themselves have the eloquence of bitterness. They are insistent and emphatic. He scoffs at love, "une sottise plus grande que le monde"; and he even mocks God: "le dernier de nos ouvriers est moins bousilleur" (Obs, pp.34, 38). And the imagery he summons to his service is aggressive and telling, as in this example:

Imaginez une petite fille à qui l'on aurait montré une poupée vraiment merveilleuse, exactement telle qu'une petite fille en peut rêver; à qui l'on ferait désirer cette poupée pendant des mois; et quand on la lui donnerait, que la petite fille commencerait à jouer, la poupée s'ouvrirait par le milieu et lui apparaîtrait pleine de vermine...  
(Obs, p.39)

Jaccottet has never written anything else as perverse and aggressive as this monologue. It seems that the mask of

fiction enabled him to release an outpouring of bitter language. As Marc Alyn said in his review, "dans sa sobriété hagarde, la relation de ce monologue d'écorché-vif est hallucinante".<sup>60</sup>

The essence of the master's explanation is that life is not worth living, and that when we think it is we are deluding ourselves. The fundamental and enduring truth is the void:

rien n'est, hormis le mal de le savoir(...) c'est un rien hérissé, armé, épineux.

Il y a le vide qui est de toutes façons découvert et ressenti comme vide, un jour ou l'autre...

Tout sombre dans le vide, dans l'indescriptible, dans ce pour quoi le mot désert, le mot ténèbres, le mot vide sont encore beaucoup trop flatteurs. (Obs, pp.49, 53, 78)

We try all the time, he says, to eliminate this void, by denying it, masking it, or ignoring it. That is how he accounts for his former behaviour:

Je me suis détourné longtemps aussi, bien que toute ma vie j'aie senti, plus ou moins profonde, lointaine en moi, une sorte de terreur ou d'horreur latente... (p.46)

His despair was not provoked by any specific incident or experience, but simply by a sudden realization of these things, a realization brought on by the mere passing of time:

la jeunesse, c'est être protégé par un avenir que certes l'on ne croit pas, mais que l'on sente illimité. Tout d'un coup l'avenir s'efface, apparaît nul, alors que le nombre d'années que l'on peut vraisemblablement espérer vivre n'a pas diminué tant que cela. Je n'ai pas connu de pire moment.<sup>61</sup>

60. In La Table ronde, Feb.1962, p.118.

61. Obs, p.57. Cf. pp.53-4: "Il est naturel que la jeunesse soit plus facilement dupée: parce qu'elle a quelques traits de cette harmonie dont nous rêvons (...) Le premier cheveu gris nous découronne et nous révèle que la mort était en nous". This association of ageing with despair gives thematic significance to the age-difference between the two characters. It proceeds from Jaccottet's own mid-life crisis, which he later

An immediate consequence of this newfound lucidity is that he must reject as falsehood all his past happiness, that no memories can remain intact:

la pire cruauté du destin est cette ombre que projette la révélation de la mort sur les fragments les plus clairs de notre passé (...) que trouverais-je d'autre que des instants déformés, des paysages irréels, des débris de gestes, des visages confus, brouillés?  
(Obs, pp.72-3)

The master's nihilism is now total.

We cannot, of course, say that the author shares these views, merely that he can conceive and entertain them, and that he feels their power. In terms of the fiction, the master is arguing against opinions he once held and which the narrator may still hold. What Jaccottet is doing, through his character, is making out an extended case against opinions he himself had held - since much of "the master's former doctrine" corresponds to ideas he had expressed in La Promenade and elsewhere. There is mention, for example, of the mysterious signs of plenitude so cherished by Jaccottet (and by Roud):

Des fragments de songe, de lumineux débris. Je sais bien à quoi vous pensez (...) Ce que nous appelions des signes. Des journées claires, des mouvements ailés, des paroles vraiment données. (Obs, pp.48-9)

These are dismissed with typical sarcasm:

...il y a les signes, les promesses. Il était donc grand temps, ces fameux signes, de les rameuter, de les préserver du vide envahissant; et de fonder sur eux quelque système capable, en désespoir de cause, de truquer une fois de plus la vérité, c'est-à-dire de se concilier le vide, ou de le faire apparaître comme source de plénitude... (Obs, p.53)

That last phrase refers to a "truquage" denounced a few pages

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61.(contd) called "ce moment particulièrement obscur de la vie où l'on sent s'éloigner la jeunesse" (Montaigne-Preis 1972, Hamburg, p.43).

later:

Après être apparue comme source de lumière (vous vous souvenez, c'était cela que nous pensions?), la mort devient la véritable obscurité. (Obs, p.57)

The narrator expands on this belief they once held in these terms:

cette fin était en meme temps le moteur de notre course: renversant presque follement les termes, il voyait dans la mort l'aliment premier de la vie... (Obs, p.417)

It is none other than the paradox which figured in La Promenade,<sup>62</sup> here being criticized indirectly by the author.

Jaccottet may not share his character's total despair, but he does share his self-irony. And he would not be writing this if he didn't feel, like the master, that:

Tout ce que nous avons pensé des secours du monde visible, tout ce que nous avons dit de la soumission à l'ordre du monde, de l'acceptation des limites, m'est apparu trop vite dit, cru trop aisément. (Obs, pp.57-8)

Again we can sense a reference to the latter part of La Promenade. And a particularly telling phrase, near the end of the monologue, is this simple one:

La vérité, comprenez-vous, c'est que je ne puis passer, qu'il n'y a rien à faire, que je me heurte...<sup>63</sup>

The emphasis is Jaccottet's own, and it speaks of his primal fear of being finally blocked, of the personal nightmares for which this fictional character is a mouthpiece.<sup>64</sup>

62. It is a verbal echo of Prom, p.101: "si vous me permettez encore cette folie un peu soudaine (...) c'est la mort qui éclaire nos journées", and of P/I, p.76: "la mort (...) soit l'aliment de la lumière inépuisable". The same paradox appears on Prom, p.121, and recurs in Eléments as a hypothesis: "Si la destruction révélait autre chose que la destruction?" (El, p.188)

63. Obs, pp.77-8. Cf. the narrator's comment (p.168): "lui qui ne rêvait que de passages, il n'a pu accepter cet arrêt".

64. Clerval rightly remarks (p.71) that: "il est impossible de ne pas faire le rapprochement avec le monologue du juge pénitent, dans La Chute de Camus". We do not need

The second half of L'Obscurité represents as it were the other side of a diptych, showing the same themes and many of the same incidents from a different angle, that of the narrator's subsequent reflections. Jaccottet seems to have meant this to balance the sombre first half, and

64. (contd) to posit the influence on Jaccottet of this book of 1956 (also designated as a "récit"). But we may discuss the various points of similarity which can be found between Jaccottet's work and that of Camus. J.-L. Baudry, for example, says that the question treated in L'Obscurité is "celle-là même que Camus jugeait être la question fondamentale de la philosophie: 'la vie vaut-elle la peine d'être vécue?'" (Tel Quel, no.9, 1962, p.57). And indeed Le Mythe de Sisyphe began by stating the problem of suicide: "L'absurde commande-t-il la mort (...) y a-t-il une logique jusqu'à la mort? (Le Mythe de Sisyphe, 1942, p.22). The philosophical dualism of Jaccottet's thought does seem akin to Camus, for whom "ce qui est absurde, c'est la confrontation de cet irrationnel et de ce désir éperdu de clarté dont l'appel résonne au plus profond de l'homme", and to whom "L'absurde naît de cette confrontation entre l'appel humain et le silence déraisonnable du monde" (Ibid, pp.37, 45).

Camus, however, is not much concerned with poetry; and there is no evidence that Jaccottet gave him closer attention than other fashionable writers of his time. His only published reference to Camus (in La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne of 28 March 1950) accepts that his writings are good, but regrets that they are dominated by a critical approach and political subject-matter - by "la pensée". Similarities between them must be attributed not to any direct influence of the older writer on the younger, or even to particular common sources (Camus is not indebted to Rilke, nor is Jaccottet to Nietzsche): it is just that they share a common grounding in Western thought and feeling.

Perhaps the greatest difference between them is that Jaccottet retains a sort of poet's belief in the divine or the invisible. One passage where he states his distance from nihilism may be an allusion to Camus's L'Homme révolté: "...ils avaient décidé, hardiment, d'épuiser le possible (...) j'admirais la fierté de ces hommes presque assurés du néant, et qui n'en étaient que plus désireux d'agir, d'aimer, de conquérir. (...) Pourtant, je n'avais jamais eu sincèrement le désir de me joindre à eux (...) Autre chose, en dépit de tout, continuait de parler au fond de moi..." (Obs, p.159).

indeed it is slightly longer: but it is less dense and more fragmentary (there are six major breaks as against two), as the master's coherence and conviction gives way to the sometimes dazed groping of the narrator (and perhaps of the author too).

The ostensible subject remains the master. The narrator reviews his former beliefs (now betrayed) and his past life, hoping to identify the error in them - and thereby to preserve himself from the same fate. But behind this narrator's mental endeavour, Jaccottet is himself confronting the question he had placed in the master's mouth:

Qui, je veux dire quel homme sensible, un peu meilleur qu'une bête, pourrait considérer en face le spectacle qui lui est donné, et ne pas défaillir?<sup>65</sup>

This half of the book is thus more closely allied to Eléments than was the first. As Marc Alyn comments: "Il s'agit toujours pour l'auteur d'inventorier (...) ses raisons d'être et ses moyens d'existence spirituelle".<sup>66</sup> The style here is likewise nearer to Jaccottet's other prose-works, displaying a delicacy and warmth which the master's monologue could not have.

At the outset we are given a fuller exposition of the world-view which the master had communicated to his disciple, including his views on history, science, culture and particularly religion. He was fascinated by the remaining vestiges of ancient religions (Obs, pp.93-4), and maintained a sort of religiosity without accepting the forms and doctrines of

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65. Obs, p.70. Cf. p.156: "Tout ce qu'il faut que je sache, c'est si le malheur pouvait être évité, ou s'il était fatal; autrement dit, s'il est fatal que l'homme lucide s'effondre"; or Jou, p.52 (May 1972): "aucune existence ne serait possible les yeux ouverts sur ce que le monde a d'horrible..."

66. In La Table ronde, Feb. 1962, p.120.

the Church:

nous nous refusions à penser qu'une vérité définitive eût jamais pu être offerte à l'homme, préférant imaginer l'histoire d'une succession de pressentiments partiels, locaux, autour desquels s'était amalgamé tout ce qu'il faut pour constituer un dogme, un système, et étouffer au bout d'un certain nombre de siècles la flamme que l'on avait cru pouvoir faire durer: quand il nous semblait, à nous, que cette flamme échappait, devait resurgir sans cesse ailleurs, sous peine de n'être plus une flamme... (Obs, p.97)

The presentiments in question pointed, he thought, towards the reality of an "other life"; they were the sole fragile links man could have with what he called "l'illimité". We learn presently that certain vivid memories of childhood had such a significance for the master, and that the exaltation of passionate love - ephemeral as it was - had its source in that dream of plenitude. Subsequently, the master had found serenity in the modest and orderly life he led in the country, supported by his wife's affection and by the visible world of objects and of light.

There is much more in this part to recall Jaccottet's other writings than there was in the master's monologue. For example, the passage just quoted about religion corresponds to the text "Dieu perdu dans l'herbe" in Eléments.<sup>67</sup> And the section dealing with the countryside resembles the "Exemples" of La Promenade<sup>68</sup> - although they were to some extent literary exercises, whereas this uses similar material in the service of a fictional drama. In the first half of L'Obscurité Jaccottet had been voicing thoughts he trembled to think; in the second he is reconsidering nos-

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67. Particularly El, p.164. It is also close to the attitude of Musil's Ulrich. Another direct analogy between the books is the distinction drawn between moderation and mediocrity (El, p.39 and Obs, p.157).

68. The text "L'approche des montagnes" (Prom, pp.57-67) is echoed on Obs, p.147.



talgically some of his past familiar themes.

He is also transposing parts of his own life. The account of the master's country walks with his gracious wife and lively young son is particularly autobiographical, being written, presumably, at Grignan where the author's circumstances were similar. And the fictional affair of the young actress (the reconstructed scene of her refusal provides a pleasing interlude in the first-person narration) seems to include memories of Jaccottet's early sentimental adventures mentioned in L'Effraie.<sup>69</sup> It is the author himself, not just his narrator, who must answer the master's case against this life.

There are three stages in the answer. The first is an impatient outcry as the narrator recalls his own happiness in the countryside:

Eh bien! ce que j'ai vu d'atroce n'efface pas, ne suffit pas à effacer ou altérer ce qui fut là par moi vécu, absorbé, savouré; ce ne sont pas ces instants qui lui ont manqué, c'est lui qui leur a été infidèle, qui les a trahis ... (Obs, p.149)

The second is a definition of the "error" in the master's approach which caused this betrayal:

quand j'avais évoqué sa terreur maladive de la mort et même de la souffrance, j'avais touché à la vraie explication de sa chute (...) n'avait-il pas cherché à tout avoir? (Obs, p.161)

He had fallen, in other words, into one of the more subtle pitfalls of pride, whereas he ought to have sought "l'effacement véritable" (p.162). This judgement rests on an important ethical consideration found as early as "L'Histoire de l'avare" which opened L'Ignorant:<sup>70</sup> the danger of resting

69. e.g. P/E, pp.36-38. Here too there are analogies with the unconsummated passions of Musil's Ulrich.

70. L'Ignorant, p.13: "s'il prend sa vie ou ses propos pour un trésor, / il passera ses jours à craindre le voleur". Jaccottet's notion of effacement makes

on one's cherished certainties. Behind the master's apparent modesty lay a tragic hubris. His longing for the absolute refused to take adequate account of the obstacles inherent in the human condition. Clerval insists on this point. The master's fall, he says twice (pp.71, 76), "prend la valeur d'une parabole": it is due to "démésure", "excès d'orgueil", "défi prométhéen", "angélisme impénitent", and "un idéalisme sans rapport avec le réel" (Clerval, pp.70-73).<sup>71</sup> To Starobinski also, L'Obscurité is "un récit parabolique"; but he notes that the lesson here, like that of Jaccottet's other didactic passages, is firstly a piece of self-criticism:

s'il s'acharne à dénoncer cette erreur, nous comprenons bien que ce n'est pas sans en avoir admiré, et peut-être parfois partagé la témérité.

The "moral" has been drawn, and the book could end very neatly with it. But to do so would misrepresent the author's thought: there is a third stage of answering to come (a stage which Clerval neglects). The last seven pages form a corrective postscript, in which the narrator, after a period of depression, withdraws his over-assured condemnation of the master. The passage is concerned with the uncertainty, or "provisionality" of all human insights. Life is necessarily perilous; there are limits to our understanding which we must accept; all confident affirmations are misleading.<sup>72</sup>

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70. (contd) nonsense of G. Piroué's accusation that he is too prudent: "A la parole du Christ 'Celui qui sauvera sa vie la perdra...', Jaccottet paraît préférer: 'Tiens ferme ce que tu as...'" (Mercure de France, March 1962, p.697).

71. Starobinski's preface to Jaccottet, Poésie 1946-1967, p.18.

72. This explanation of what Jaccottet means by ignorance is curiously similar to an idea in contemporary science: "There is no absolute knowledge. And those who claim

The master had neglected this "uncertainty principle". For example, while never denying the existence of suffering, he had always been too eager to declare that it can be overcome. And then afterwards in his despair he had concluded too hastily that all struggle is vain. The narrator, for his part, had been sobered by the ordeal:

j'ai perdu toute assurance, ayant cessé de croire que le privilège d'un regard prétendu pur conduirait mes pas sans faillir dans la demeure divine.<sup>73</sup>

But he will not give in, he will continue the admittedly unequal combat of life, in all the risks and contradictions of the real world:

Maintenant, je me contente de dire que s'il y a une vraie vie, si les reflets que nous en avons vus ne mentent pas, il ne nous est jamais permis de nous en croire les habitants définitifs, de nous y installer (...) On ne peut donc ni se taire, ni parler sans se corriger perpétuellement. (Obs, p.166)

In ending the book thus, Jaccottet sacrifices a sense of finality for the sake of an openness which he values more highly. Instead of the closed circle of the roman à thèse, he leads the reader back into the world outside the page.

At the same time, however, it is a very intangible ending, making us wonder whether we've made any progress at all. It is hard to disagree with J.-L. Baudry's remark that: "le livre refermé, c'est encore les mots obstinés du maître que nous entendons, sa démonstration méthodique, opiniâtre".<sup>74</sup>

Baudry feels that the two halves of the book do not balance,

72.(contd) it, whether they are scientists or dogmatists, open the door to tragedy. All information is imperfect. We have to treat it with humility. That is the human condition; and that is what quantum physics says. I mean that literally". (J. Bronowski, The Ascent of Man, 1973, p.353)

73. Obs, p.168. This implies a renunciation of some of the beliefs underlying "Le Livre des morts".

74. In Tel Quel, 9, 1962, p.57.

and proposes an explanation: "La thèse du desespoir est rationnelle, alors que les liens qui nous rattachent à la vie ne le sont jamais".<sup>75</sup> Perhaps it is easier to write negatively than positively - Jaccottet seems to have thought so, and he did not wait to finish the book before expressing dissatisfaction with it.<sup>76</sup> But by the very conception of the work, it was not likely to balance evenly.

We can be glad, nevertheless, that he resisted the impulse to burn it. L'Obscurité is an accomplished piece of writing, successfully integrating narrative, descriptive and reflective material, and displaying a range and depth of feeling. For these reasons, it shows Jaccottet's "literary talent" better than any other prose-work. The high seriousness of its thought may generate impatience, but it also commands respect. And the austerity of subject and style has been particularly admired - Marc Alyn called it "un fort beau récit, écrit dans un style bruissant et grave".<sup>77</sup> Without recourse to superlatives, we can say that this book destined for obscurity has a greater integrity and evokes deeper resonances than many novels that have been acclaimed more loudly.

In the context of Jaccottet's career, L'Obscurité represents not a climax but certainly an exceptional moment, perhaps an indispensable one, testifying as it does to a time of personal crisis. It is a very untypical work - only the subdued fervour of the country scenes could be called

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75. Loc. cit. The narrator indeed accepts that the master's argument is strong (Obs, pp.158) but defends intuition (pp.160, 163).

76. Obs, pp.133, 158. Later references - in Prom, p.143 (1961) and Sem, p.98 (1966) - show that it is not the work the author most values.

77. In La Table ronde, Feb. 1962, p.119.

"vintage Jaccottet" - but that makes it a more revealing document. The fictional mode enabled the author to include, behind a thin veil, aspects of himself usually hidden completely by his customary pudeur.

Jaccottet's next publication after Eléments and L'Obscurité was La Semaïson (1963), subtitled "Carnets 1954-1962". In fact more than half of its contents dates from 1959-60 and is thus contemporary with the other two books. But it is very much more heterogeneous.

For a long time, Jaccottet had been keeping notebooks into which he jotted occasional thoughts, observations, poetic ideas and quotations from his reading.<sup>78</sup> But until around 1960 his only intention for this material was to develop it into poems and prose-texts. And some of it was indeed so used, perhaps a great deal. We may, for example, compare this entry dated November 1959:

Parler avec ce vide au coeur, contre lui. Pousses  
d'acacias sur le blanc presque bleu du ciel.  
Brûleur de feuilles mortes, arracheur de mauvaises  
herbes, se borner peut-être à cela.

Ces pousses avec leurs dernières feuilles pâles,

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78. The earliest entry in La Semaïson is dated May 1954. But he was certainly keeping notes before that, when he lived in Paris. L'Effraie (pp.47-54) contains, under the heading "La Semaïson, Notes pour des poèmes", fifteen brief texts of which one dates from 1947. A sequel called "Nouvelles notes pour la semaison" is in L'Ignorant (P/I, p.52. Cf. pp.53-5). And some of the observations published in Pour l'art seem likewise to be based on notebook entries, for example this one from "Au crayon, entre deux comptes" (in Pour l'art, Sept.-Oct. 1950, p.17):

Une fois, il y'eut cette petite fille agenouillée  
auprès d'une nasse ronde où elle avait enfermé un  
chaton qu'elle faisait tourner sur lui-même, en  
riant. Je ne me lasse pas de réécouter cette voix  
tendre, un rien moqueuse, qui répétait "Mio amore",

fines. Hiver commençant.<sup>79</sup>

With the following extract from Eléments (p.174):

...Les très fines pousses d'acacia sur le bleu,  
presque blanc, du ciel plus mince qu'une feuille.  
L'hiver. Etre un homme qui brûle les feuilles  
mortes, qui arrache la mauvaise herbe, et qui  
parle contre le vide.

A slightly different case is that of the poetic fragment of June 1966 (Sem, p.110), which is used with modifications in Leçons (P/L, p.163). Here and in other places we can see the author revising or rewriting material first jotted into his notebook. There are probably many more cases we cannot trace, since La Semaïson contains only that fraction of the original notebooks that was deemed good enough for publication.<sup>80</sup> We may suppose that texts such as the "Exemples" of La Promenade contain former notebook material, and that some of the parenthetical descriptions of nature in Eléments may have the same source.<sup>81</sup> Likewise, some of Jaccottet's brief contributions to the NRF over the years seem to be developed from notebook entries.<sup>82</sup>

78. (contd)

comme une chanson.

79. Sem, p.24. Page-numbers are always quoted from the larger 2nd edition (Paris, 1971).

80. Jaccottet told me that he cut out a lot from the original notebooks, but edited the remainder only slightly, for example to correct grammatical errors.

81. For example those in "Dieu perdu dans l'herbe", pp.166-7, 169, 172-3. Cf. Obs, p.163.

82. "Un effort de correction" in NRF, June 1958, pp.1124-26; "Notes" in NRF, Oct. 1958, pp.741-3; "Notes d'hiver" in NRF, Feb. 1959, pp.363-5; "Notes éparses" in NRF, May 1960, pp.1003-6 (some of which appears in Sem, p.33, Feb. 1960); more "Notes éparses" in NRF, July 1960, pp.171-3; "Fragments de pensées" in NRF, Dec. 1960, pp.1141-7; "En chemin" in NRF, Aug. 1962, pp.368-70; "L'hiver au nom si juste" in NRF, March 1964, pp.560-62 (of which parts are in Sem, pp.75-81, Jan. 1964); and "Soir" in NRF, Oct. 1967, pp.636-8. A later example is "Les Cormorans" (in NRF, Oct. 1974), which begins with two notebook entries, and is based on many others.

To use notebooks in such a manner is not uncommon: many writers do it. To publish such notebooks, however, is less usual, particularly for an author still in his thirties. It may seem an immodest step to take, even though the first edition was not circulated widely.<sup>83</sup> In part, however, it represents an admission by the author that for four years he could not write whole poems but could only "accumuler les débuts de poèmes, les ébauches, les notes, les fragments de mouvements..."<sup>84</sup> Various of these fragments indeed allude to his personal crisis and loss of inspiration:

Les joints des mots se rompent, certains sombrent,  
d'autres s'éloignent, mais le fond même  
et la distance même ne sont plus saisis. (p.27, Nov.  
1959)

He says that a long poem supposes an equilibrium he has lost; "Mais comment passer de certaines notes poétiques au poème? La voix retombe trop vite".<sup>85</sup> Jaccottet must have felt that he had some worthwhile images and insights to disseminate, despite the imperfections he could not suppress.

He was aware, in any case, of precedents for the publication of such material. An important one for him was Gustave Roud's Feuillets, which he himself had described as "des carnets de notes d'un poète à la recherche de la plénitude qui seule permet l'éclosion du poème".<sup>86</sup> Some of Jaccottet's jottings about landscape are very close to those of Roud. A somewhat different precedent lay in the works of Francis Ponge, which Jaccottet had known and reviewed regu-

83. This first edition was published by Payot, Lausanne, as part of the "Collection poétique d'écrivains romands".

84. Prom, p.142 (note of 1961). The first poems of Airs date from the start of 1961.

85. Sem, pp.46-7, March 1960. Cf. p.58: "C'est comme si l'on ne pouvait plus parler, ne savait plus parler. Il faut passer par là sous peine de mentir, de tricher".

86. In La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, 29 Sept. 1950, p.1.

larly since 1946, and which often contain fragments or drafts of prose-poetry.<sup>87</sup> Jaccottet has always admired Ponge's concern for seizing the solidity of the real world, and condones his refusal of literary perfection. Of Ponge's Rage de l'expression he had written: "ces textes(...)donnent non pas le résultat de la recherche, mais cette recherche elle-même".<sup>88</sup>

In the 1963 edition of La Semaïson, the reflective fragments are allied to Eléments and L'Obscurité. As in those works, the author keeps returning to the question of the meaning of human life and aspirations. One important passage is a strong defence of his interest in "le songe divin", in poetic or religious intuitions:

Quelqu'un dit, à peu près: "J'eus alors l'impression que m'était dévoilé l'ordre du monde", ou encore: "Je compris le langage des oiseaux" (...) cette expérience prend des formes diverses, mais le résultat est toujours le même. Elle s'est produite depuis qu'il y a des hommes, et l'on en trouverait dans les textes mystiques, philosophiques ou purement littéraires des centaines d'exemples.(...) Ce mirage, ou cette intuition, révélation ou rêve, oppose un ordre au désordre, une plénitude au vide, et au dégoût l'émerveillement, l'espoir, l'enthousiasme.(...) n'avons-nous pas le devoir, ou au moins le droit, d'écouter en nous cette très profonde, irrésistible nostalgie, comme si vraiment elle disait quelque chose d'important et de vrai?<sup>89</sup>

That could be termed an agnostic's reply to scepticism.

Various fragments suggest some sort of belief in a "souffle .....

87. Jean Thibaudeau (Ponge, Paris 1967, p.272) lists ten reviews by Jaccottet. The reference to Ponge in La Promenade has already been mentioned. Jaccottet admires Ponge both for his attention to things and for his masterly control of words.

88. In La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, 25 June 1952. Ponge's book itself says (p.32): "ces notes (...) me dégoûtent moins qu'un opus raté". And Ponge never concedes that to publish fragments is a pis-aller.

89. Sem, pp.20-21 (Nov. 1959). Cf. El, pp.78-79.



invisible" to which the name God used to be given:

...le ciel n'a été une image de l'illimité qu'aussi longtemps qu'il semblait lui-même illimité, inaccessible (...) mais le vrai invisible n'a changé ni diminué ni faibli en rien; il a seulement trouvé sa véritable nature, qui est sans images. Maintenant, Dieu est vraiment esprit.(...) En vérité, c'est à se demander si Dieu fut jamais plus puissant qu'aujourd'hui où sa mort a été proclamée.<sup>90</sup>

While refusing established religions, Jaccottet accepts what he considers to be the truth behind them. And he believes that poetry is intimately connected with this mysterious truth.

Despite this, however, it is uncertainty that dominates the reflections of La Semaïson:

A partir de l'incertitude avancer tout de même. Rien d'acquis, car tout acquis ne serait-il pas paralysie? (...) A partir du dénuement, de la faiblesse, du doute. (p.22, Nov. 1959)

As at the end of L'Obscurité, doubt is seen as a necessary safeguard, even paradoxically as a support for survival:

"je prends appui sur ce dont je ne puis douter,/ le doute..."<sup>91</sup> As Georges Anex said in his review: "La méditation de Jaccottet ne cesse de se tourner autour de ce thème contradictoire de l'impuissance et de l'espoir, du doute sur lequel se fonde la certitude".<sup>92</sup> This theme generates its greatest tension in the poetic fragments, such as this one about "Le Destructeur":

J'ai vu en lui la source du jour  
et je dois apprendre à le reconnaître en même temps  
pour celui qui empoisonne les eaux.  
Je dois tenir en une seule réalité invisible  
source et cendre, lèvres et carcasse de rat mort.  
(p.38, March 1960)

90. Sem, pp.40-41, March 1960. L'Obscurité (pp.97-98) paraphrases this passage. Cf. Obs, p.170.

91. Sem, p.24, Nov. 1959. Cf. El, p.153: "...prendre en quelque sorte appui sur l'abîme pour se maintenir au-dessus, sinon le franchir (qui serait le supprimer)".

92. In Gazette de Lausanne, 4 Jan. 1964, p.9.

The theme of beauty is another recurrent one, and a related one, since Jaccottet cannot separate the perception of beauty from a sense of truth and a dream of hope:

Comment se fait-il que ceci soit beau et cela non?  
Expérience immédiate, et dans le travail fréquente:  
ceci ment et cela ne ment pas, ou ment moins. Donc  
un ordre, donc un espoir?<sup>93</sup>

This explains why his aesthetics leave little space for mere technique and ornamentation. The most beautiful works of art are not perfect forms but forms open to hidden truth:

Il se peut que la beauté naisse quand la limite et l'illimité deviennent visibles en même temps, c'est-à-dire quand on voit les formes tout en devinant qu'elles ne disent pas tout, qu'elles ne sont pas réduites à elles-mêmes, qu'elles laissent à l'insaisissable sa part.<sup>94</sup>

Those are ideas that often guide Jaccottet's appreciation of painting and of poetry. The note in question contrasts Rembrandt, in whose work "l'illimité est fortement présent" (p.40), with the impoverished formality of Ingres. And the poetry Jaccottet favours is "parole-passage, ouverture laissée au souffle".<sup>95</sup> But it is natural rather than man-made

93. Sem, p.19, Nov. 1959. Cf. Obs, pp.95-6: "Nous nous étions dit souvent, devant d'anciennes idoles: 'Elles sont plus belles que d'autres qui sont pourtant le fruit de plus de science et de savoir-faire'; et quelque chose nous empêchait d'admettre que plus de beauté ne signifiât pas aussi plus de vérité. La beauté qui nous touchait jusqu'aux larmes, si elle pénétrait si profond en nous, n'était-ce pas, se pouvait-il que ce ne fût pas parce qu'elle nous parlait 'une vérité inoubliable...'. Jaccottet's first comments on Japanese haiku praise them for their "vérité" (Sem, p.55, Aug. 1960).

94. Sem, pp.39-40 (March 1960). B. Christoff paraphrases thus: "il s'agit de concilier la limite, qui est forme claire, dehors, et l'illimité, qui est souffle obscur, dedans" (Écriture, I, 1964, p.169). Bonnefoy objects to mere formal perfection on similar grounds.

95. Sem, p.42 (March 1960). In a good example of this, some lines from Hölderlin, he finds "l'ouverture infinie qui me fait vivre" (Pay, p.149). Cf. Pay, p.125: "Tout livre digne de ce nom s'ouvre comme une porte, ou une fenêtre".

beauty that offers him the most truth and inspiration:

Beauté: perdue comme une graine, livrée aux vents,  
aux orages, ne faisant nul bruit, souvent perdue,  
toujours détruite; mais elle persiste à fleurir,  
au hasard, ici, là (...) Cela est. Cela persiste  
contre le bruit, la sottise, tenace parmi le sang  
et la malédiction, dans la vie impossible à assumer,  
à vivre. (p.57, March 1962)

We can see there Jaccottet's typical opposition of beauty to suffering, despite the apparent imbalance between them. Such passages give La Semaïson a framework of ideas, although the reflections are not developed and pursued as in Eléments and L'Obscurité. In most of the book, indeed, the thought is less prominent than the images of the visible world.

The poetic fragments in La Semaïson, dating mostly from 1958-1960, are in the same reflective vein as L'Ignorant.<sup>96</sup> They are written in long lines which include frequent alexandrins and not a few lines of fourteen syllables; but there is a great irregularity, as we would expect from early drafts. The poet himself confides: "...je tâtonne entre les anciens mots,/parmi les ruines des anciens vers..." (p.25). The most numerous fragments in this style date from November 1959, and seem to be the remains of a project mentioned the previous month:

Elever une fois de plus l'ornement sur la nuit,  
l'abîme. Ornement rêvé: à la fois savant et  
musical, ferme et sourd, vaste et caché. Modèles:  
Hölderlin, Leopardi, quelques poèmes de Baudelaire.  
(p.18)

The themes of time and death make this an abandoned sequel to "Le Livre des morts", only more sombre, more ashen, because of the author's greater sense of nothingness. One of the fragments speaks, indeed, of an offering to the

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96. The one on pp.13-14 (Nov. 1958) actually echoes "Le Combat inégal" (P/I, p.77).

deceased:

Je glisse dans ta main qui ne touchera plus  
le rêche ni le tendre de la terre cette feuille  
à peine une aile, à peine une flèche un peu claire  
en manière de guide, ou de lampe, ou d'obole;  
elle n'a contre la voracité du gouffre  
que la force de l'invisible. Ce qu'elle dit  
n'est qu'au tonnerre de la ruine le défi  
de ce qui ne peut être vu ni cru ni affirmé  
directement ou par image, et dont pourtant  
je te fais don. Ce qu'elle porte est comme trace  
éparse dans la neige, d'un passage  
attestant qu'il n'est pas de sourire qui ne s'efface  
qu'il ne naît de sourire que sous la hache  
du temps. (pp.26-7, Nov. 1959)

That could almost be a complete poem - though a context  
would improve it. It is the finest of shadowy fragments.

Of the others we must say with Georges Anex: "le poème  
n'est que noté, non pas vraiment écrit, il demeure prison-  
nier de l'indécision ou de l'étalement des images, comme  
abandonné à un mouvement qui ne tend pas à s'organiser et  
à s'accomplir".<sup>97</sup> In some cases the poetic impulse can  
scarcely be discerned at all.

After 1960, this vein is abandoned, and with it the  
desperate images of ruin. Instead Jaccottet turned to  
brief poems written in short lines, sometimes resembling  
the examples of haiku quoted in August of that year (p.54).  
Since his best verse of 1961-64 appears as Airs, the corres-  
ponding parts of La Semaïson are dominated all the more by  
prose, by those poetic notes on landscape which contribute  
most to the book's character. It is as though he was taking  
the advice given to the narrator in L'Obscurité (p.138) to  
stop turning his back to the window, and to look at the  
things outside.

The landscape in question, on almost every page, is the  
"paysage familier, presque su par coeur" of Grignan.<sup>98</sup>

97. In Gazette de Lausanne, 4 Jan. 1964, p.9.

98. Sem, p.36 (March 1960). The obvious exceptions are the

Strangely, it is never named, though the distant presence of the Mont Ventoux is mentioned at several points,<sup>99</sup> and Jaccottet does emphasize its particularity, at least in winter:

Un pays découvert, alors qu'ailleurs, en hiver, la neige vient dissimuler le sol, amollir les formes. Il est peu de lieux où soient plus visibles la terre, le sol, les assises. (p.30, Feb. 1960)

He notes down impressions of it under the changing seasons, in different weather-conditions, at various times of day.

A good example is this one dated May 1962:

Huit heures du soir. Au-dessus des marronniers chargés de fleurs, au-dessus de ces parfums, de ces émanations, de cet émoi, de cette activité, le bleu surprenant du ciel, à la fois sombre et lumineux, profondément bleu, beaucoup plus bleu que de jour, et les nuages aux dômes éblouissants. (pp.59-60)

Typically, he identifies the poetic value of the scene without obvious recourse to literary artifice (though there is excitement in the words too, with their parallel phrases and lack of verbs). The natural subject chosen may be moonlight or dawn, or flowers or birds, or the apparent blueness of the hills. Often it is trees, oaks in particular, but also almond-trees, ilexes, acacias, limes...

Jaccottet is very sensitive to the subtle processes of the vegetable world - and so it is appropriate that his title "La Semaïson" should come from them:

Les roseaux: comment leurs épis veloutés se déchirent, laissant échapper lentement un flot de graines, un jabot, dans le plus absolu silence.<sup>100</sup>

These brief notes are concerned little with the perman-

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98. (contd) notes on Majorca and Ibiza (Sem, pp.11-13, 61-64).

99. Sem, pp.17, 29, 35 and 47. Other place-names close to Grignan are the hamlet Le Tuilière and the river Lez (p.29) and the Rochecourbière plateau (p.48).

100. Sem, p.10, Oct. 1955, his emphasis. Here and on pp.31-2 he stresses how dissimilar plant life is from human life.

ence of the landscape; they emphasize the ephemerality of its light-effects and the fragility of its vegetation. It is within time, and not outside it, that natural beauty seems to acquire a marvellous splendour. As Jacques Borel comments:

Ce rayonnement, il semble bien que ce soit dans les images du monde, et justement les plus fragiles d'entre elles, dans ce "comble de délicatesse", la floraison miraculeuse et vite essoufflée aux branches d'un pêcher, les larmes instantanées de la pluie, une roseur dans le ciel ou le vol imperceptible de l'air, que Jaccottet attende le plus souvent de le voir surgir.<sup>101</sup>

And a special poetic frisson comes from the observer's awareness that his own watching eye is as mortal as the things it sees:

Oiseaux tournants ou fléchoyants, nul ne vous voit  
sinon qui meurt, qui s'use, qui tombe lentement en  
poudre. (p.28)

This sense of mortality has led one critic to overstate the pessimism of the book, and to declare: "le climat de La Semaïson est sombre, et le recueil blessé par l'inquiétude de l'auteur momentanément privé de voix".<sup>102</sup> Some notes of November 1959, admittedly, are reminiscent of L'Obscurité:

En moi, par ma bouche, n'a jamais parlé que la mort.  
Toute poésie est la voix donnée à la mort(...)Regard  
et voix du détruit. (p.28)

But later ones tend to stress the possible, albeit slender, reasons for hope:

ce qui me reste est presque rien; mais c'est comme  
une très petite porte par laquelle il faut passer, au-  
delà de laquelle rien ne prouve que l'espace ne soit  
pas aussi grand qu'on l'a rêvé. (p.58, March 1962)

And the presence of the visible world generally gives a lightness to the book, particularly in the later pages where

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101. In Critique, No.213 (1965), pp.188-9. This alludes particularly to Sem, p.31.

102. J. Chessex in Gazette de Lausanne, 31 July 1965, p.10.

Nouveau monde  
non plus de pensées  
non plus d'axiomes à développer paisiblement jusqu'à  
la mort  
mais un pavillon d'images (...)  
On ne possède plus que du fugace  
Tout ce qui est sûr s'éteint comme une lampe éteinte  
On se précipite sur une source qui a fui  
On est nourri par le vent du matin. (pp.68-9, Oct.1962)

La Semaïson is, as one reviewer put it: "un livre toujours en train de se défaire, de renaître ailleurs. Quelque chose de brûlant, de pressé, d'inquiet le traverse".<sup>103</sup> And another said it made him think "à certains vers de Rilke, à ce frémissement qui traverse les Sonnets à Orphée, et emporte l'esprit dans un vol au royaume infini de l'Ouvert, du Vent".<sup>104</sup> This openness belongs to the essential character of the carnet. Jaccottet tries to "saisir de fuyants, d'illusoires rapports, et tout ce qui a l'air dans ce monde de me faire signe, qui en tout cas me touche, bien avant toute réflexion".<sup>105</sup> By refusing literary elaboration, he allows the reader to share the immediacy of the moment, as his fragmentary words reach towards things which defy them. The resulting sketch often feels all the more rapid for its lack of verbs:

103. B. Christoff in *Ecriture I* (Lausanne 1964), p.168.

104. C. Esteban in *Mercure de France*, June 1964, p.300.

105. In NRF, Feb. 1959, p.364, his emphasis. Cf. Sem, p.67: "Les choses devraient être saisies brusquement mais exactement, comme d'un coup de fusil".

Oiseaux sous la pluie. Arbres en fleurs sous la pluie. L'air comme une immense vitre qui tremblerait légèrement dans son cadre. Premiers bourgeons aux marronniers. Giroflées, anémones. (p.17, March 1959)

Jaccottet's metaphors (or similes, like the one above) can be very effective, but he does not lean on them; often he passes to a second or third image, all provisional. And occasionally, in the course of describing something, he draws attention to the inadequacy of his words, and of words in general. An extreme example is this note about Majorca:

...le bleu de la mer entre les troncs et les verdure, mais le mot bleu ne suffit pas, trop doux, on voudrait presque dire noir, et ce serait faux encore. Un bleu accumulé, concentré, épais, comme un mur. En tout cas pas une ouverture. Une richesse bleue. Rien de mobile ni de scintillant non plus. Pas davantage une tache. Intense, mais calme, immobile, opaque, profond. Une présence bleue...(p.11, May 1958)

J.-P. Amette defined this stylistic device very well: "Il avance dans la phrase par approximations et atteint à la nature par corrections successives"; and remarked: "Il y a du Francis Ponge dans sa démarche. Mais un Francis Ponge moins systématique...".<sup>106</sup> The taut language is indeed "Pongien", since it is inseparable from an intent scrutiny of things: le mot juste is not a matter of elegance but of fidelity. This style forces us to read slowly, to participate in the words - and rewards us with a fuller and more pleasurable experience. It is not like reading Ponge, however, since Jaccottet's subjects are less solid, more elusive, and they are perceived by a more hesitant and mercurial sensibility.

This "notebook style", inaugurated in La Semaïson and continued since then, has proved a very good vehicle for Jaccottet's sporadic inspiration. It was one way of improv-

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106. In NRF, Feb. 1972, p.85.



ing on the exercises in poetic prose found in La Promenade: to try less hard, to return to the original notes (keeping only the good ones). The other way, that of more sustained elaboration, was used in parts of Eléments and L'Obscurité, and would reappear in Paysages avec figures absentes. The way of La Semaïson brings us closer to the everyday drama of the writer under threat of silence, as he tries to

poursuivre, disséminer, risquer des mots, leur donner juste le poids voulu, ne jamais cesser jusqu'à la fin - contre, toujours contre soi et le monde, avant d'en dépasser l'opposition, justement à travers les mots - qui passent la limite, le mur, qui traversent, franchissent, ouvrent, et finalement parfois triomphent en parfum - un instant, seulement un instant...  
(p.57, March 1962)

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In the evolution of Jaccottet's poem-writing, the years 1956-61 mark an important transition between the style of L'Ignorant and that of Airs (poèmes 1961-1964). Whereas the long and sonorous lines of "Le Livre des morts" supposed a confidence in the power of words, the reflections on poetics in La Promenade showed already a suspicion of language - a suspicion which was to deepen. He quoted there Musil's objections to poetic images (Prom, pp.112-4), an argument which he repeated on his own account in 1958:

"l'objet évoqué efface l'objet à saisir";<sup>1</sup> and he praised the "poésie dépouillée" which Hölderlin wrote after abandoning the most striking features of his style (Prom, pp.122-3). Meanwhile, in the prose notes of La Semaïson, he was concentrating on concrete objects and sights without seeking deliberate poetic effects.

A text that reveals particularly well this greater distrust of language appeared in the NRF of June 1958 under the title "Un effort de correction". In it Jaccottet expresses his dissatisfaction with two lines of L'Ignorant, saying:

J'ai senti ensuite que ces deux derniers vers étaient inférieurs à ce que j'avais voulu exprimer; ce que j'avais vu, ce que je voyais souvent le soir de mon jardin était plus simple, plus élémentaire et plus puissant. "Murmure doré", "lumière de passage" étaient des formules trop évidemment "poétiques", je veux dire plus jolies que belles..."<sup>2</sup>

His attempt at correcting them does not, however, consist of substituting plainer words within the given quatrain - instead of verse, Jaccottet writes a careful page of descriptive prose not unlike those found in La Semaïson.

It seems, indeed, that he grew increasingly uneasy about traditional verse. A note of 1959 criticizes the harmonious alexandrins of other poets with the remark: "ils jurent avec ce monde où nous sommes jetés tous..."<sup>3</sup> And in prose also, a style of sonorous eloquence is suspect.

1. El, p.76, in "A la longue plainte..." Cf. Pay, p.68: "L'image cache le réel, distrait le regard, quelquefois d'autant plus qu'elle est plus précise, plus séduisante..." In the NRF of March 1959 (p.495), Jaccottet said that his favourite among Rilke's elegies was number eight "presque sans images..."
2. In NRF, June 1958, p.1124. The lines in question are at the bottom of P/I, p.91.
3. In NRF, Feb. 1959, p.363.

Jaccottet reproaches himself in Eléments for the "style coulant" which carries him away: "cette dangereuse musique qui vous entraîne si discrètement de la vérité au mensonge".<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, certain reflections in La Semaïson continue his earlier acceptance of "un style rythmé" without rhetoric, "un bref récit légèrement solennel, psalmodié à deux doigts de la terre".<sup>5</sup> That was the style he had used before, and which for some reason had stopped working for him. Now, in 1960, he needed a new style - so we can say in retrospect - and the stimulus that produced it came from an anthology of poems unlike any he had known before: Japanese haiku.

The circumstances of the encounter are as follows. In La Promenade, Jaccottet had mentioned his suspicion of literary language and his dream of a "poésie sans images".<sup>6</sup> This prompted Jacques Masui, reviewing that book, to recommend R.H. Blyth's four-volume anthology of Haiku.<sup>7</sup> Jaccottet did not see this, however, until 1960: the first comment on it in his published notebooks (calling it "capital") dates from August of that year; and his delighted article, "L'Orient limpide", in the November NRF admits that he has not yet read to the end. At that time he had written no finished poems since "Le Livre des morts" - the period of frustration had lasted four years. The first poems of Airs,

4. El, p.148. Cf. Obs, p.160. As early as 1954 he had admitted that "rien n'est si difficile que de résister aux paroles qui entraînent, qui saoulent et nous tiennent lieu de protection" (NRF, Jan. 1965, p.176).
5. Sem, pp.43 and 47 (March 1960). Cf. Prom, pp.124-5, Sem, p.16 (Jan. 1959) and NRF, Oct. 1958, p.742.
6. Prom, pp.77-8 (cf pp.112-6).
7. Blyth, R.H. Haiku, Tokyo, 1949-52. Masui's review is in Cahiers du Sud, Jan. 1958, pp.138-43.

entitled "Fin d'hiver", date from the start of 1961: a note of that year associates them closely with the completed reading of the Haiku, which had contributed to a "décantation" in the poet's mood - "j'éprouvai le bonheur d'une renaissance" (Prom, pp.146-7). In later references to haiku, Jaccottet always remembers a personal debt incurred at that time.

In fact, Jaccottet had already read the odd haiku elsewhere, finding no more than "le raffinement et la grâce" - or so his article says.<sup>8</sup> Blyth's anthology is not so easily disposed of: it assembles hundreds of poems, commenting on each in the light of a deep understanding of Eastern and Western cultures, and its translations have the merit (to Jaccottet at least) of being more literal than literary. "The aim of haiku", says Blyth, "is not beauty; it is something much deeper and wider"<sup>9</sup> - and so he translates them not as pretty verbal objects but as moments in a world-vision both simple and serious. For those who cannot read Japanese, Blyth is a fine and stimulating mediator. I should add, however, that Jaccottet read at two removes, since English is not his second language or even his fourth. Thus his handful of haiku in French are translations of translations, and may well displease experts in Japanese, all the more so in that it seems Blyth was the only source used.<sup>10</sup>

One of Jaccottet's favourite haiku is from Buson,

8. "L'Orient limpide", in NRF, November 1960, pp.901-8.

9. Blyth, op. cit. I, pp.113-4.

10. Yet they pleased some judges. In 1967 Joan Miró issued a set of delightful lithographs entitled Haï-ku (Galerie Maeght), with 16 texts "traduits par Ph. Jaccottet". Some of these appear in NRF, Nov. 1960, pp.904-5 and in La Semaïson, pp.54-5 (Aug. 1960).

quoted thus:

Allumant une bougie  
à une autre bougie:  
une soirée de printemps.

This version exceeds the seventeen syllables of the Japanese haiku form, and Jaccottet omits to discuss the strict rules governing it. This is partly because Blyth does not observe the syllabic pattern either, being more interested in mystical speculation. It corresponds in any case to Jaccottet's relative lack of interest in questions of prosody. When he explains what fascinated him about poems like Buson's, his favoured words are "légèreté", "sérénité", "transparence" and "limpidité". His article presents them as a sort of anti-literature, differing from Western poetry by default of many of its traits: "une poésie d'où est rigoureusement exclu tout commentaire d'ordre philosophique, religieux, moral, sentimental, historique ou patriotique..."; and he attributes its quality to "un état singulier, auquel le poète accède par une série de dépouillements dont la concision de son vers n'est que la manifestation verbale".<sup>11</sup> He quotes Blyth's description of haiku as "self-obliterating", and marvels particularly at how they show the significance of apparently insignificant things and relationships. His most extreme remark, published only later, echoes Blyth's belief that the haiku's self-effacing nature "enables us, more than any other form of literature, to grasp the thing-in-itself".<sup>12</sup> Jaccottet confides:

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J'en pourrais citer des pages. Il m'est arrivé de

11. In NRF, Nov. 1960, pp.905, 907.

12. Blyth, op. cit. IV, p.1.

penser plus d'une fois, en lisant ces quatre volumes, qu'ils contenaient, de tous les mots que j'ai jamais pu déchiffrer, les plus proches de la vérité. (Sem, p.55, Aug. 1960)

It is customary to discount views about poetry formed by the reading of translations; and Jaccottet fails to distinguish between the different writers and schools of haiku (ignoring too the earlier periods and longer forms of Japanese verse). His reactions are nevertheless valid enough ones for a sensitive Western reader. The term "légèreté" is a fair rendering of Bashô's criterion of karumi,<sup>13</sup> a virtue characteristic of haiku; and "sérénité" is an apt description of the Japanese awareness and acceptance of the world. Terms like "transparence" and "limpidité" are less common in writing about haiku poetry, since they understate its suggestiveness - yet they too come naturally to a reader familiar with modern European poetry, opaque as it often is in style and feeling. Jaccottet's particular stress, however, on the state of soul of the haiku-poet, is unusual for its extensive use of frankly moral terms, such as "innocence", "modestie", "patience" and "effacement", and defective, perhaps, in its failure to distinguish Buddhist asceticism from Western puritanism. It is not that considerations of this kind are irrelevant to poets such as Bashô, for whom every haiku was his death-verse.<sup>14</sup> It is just that the emphasis they receive reflects the personal bias of Jaccottet, whose views on literature never isolate aesthetics from ethics.

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13. D. Keene, Anthology of Japanese Literature, New York, 1955, p.28.

14. They are prominent, indeed, in the modern haiku-theorist Otsuji, quoted frequently in K. Yasuda, The Japanese Haiku (Rutland and Tokyo, 1957).

The best attempt at formulating the influence of Japanese poetry on Jaccottet's own writings was made on the publication of Airs, in an extended review by Jacques Borel. "Les Haï-ku proposent", he said, "à la fois une disposition de l'âme et une forme: on voit bien l'incitation, ou la secrète confirmation, que Jaccottet a pu en recevoir".<sup>15</sup>

We will look first at the question of form, since that is easier and less important in this case. Although Jaccottet would not have written as he did if he had not read Blyth's anthology, he did not set out to "imiter le genre du haiku" (Prom, p.146). That assertion may seem exaggerated in view of the brevity of the poems in Airs - most are untitled, few exceed eight lines in length, and the lines seldom have more than eight syllables. There are some, indeed, which have only three lines, like haiku:

Le souci de la tourterelle  
c'est le premier pas du jour  
rompant ce que la nuit lie (P/A, p.124)

Such shortness proves little, however, being common in modern French poets like Char, Guillevic and Follain. Besides, for over a decade Jaccottet had been friendly with Giuseppe Ungaretti, whose Allegria (1919) contained poems much shorter. In 1954 Jaccottet had thought that "la recherche menée alors par le jeune Ungaretti [...] répond mal à notre prosodie française".<sup>16</sup> But in his notebook of

15. In NRF, July 1967, p.127. At the same time the T.L.S. reviewer mentioned a similarity between Jaccottet's inspiration and Zen Buddhism (24 Aug. 1967).

16. In NRF, July 1954, p.133. Some of his comments on Ungaretti could do service as a justification for Airs: "il fallait rompre à tout prix le discours, dissoudre le mètre, supprimer (...) tout ce qui n'était pas essentiel, les intervalles entre les éclairs: jusqu'à ce que le poème ne fût plus qu'un cri ébloui..." (Ibid, p.132). Or earlier: "Ces rares instants où l'on croit revoir le Jardin (...) il semble qu'une phrase soit déjà trop pour les dire" (Pour l'art, Nov.-Dec. 1948,

March 1960 he was wondering "comment passer de certaines notes poétiques au poème", and contrasting Ungaretti's "poème-instant" with the "poème-discours qui a toujours été le mien" which now dissatisfies him.<sup>17</sup> We can detect a similar self-reproach in his comment on form in the haiku: "sa forme brève et stricte [...] interdit tout abandon à la fluidité musicale (qui noie, dans notre lyrisme, tant de mensonges et faiblesses)".<sup>18</sup> Perhaps this Japanese variety of "poème-instant" taught a lesson in economy he had failed to learn from Ungaretti. But in any case, the Airs remain significantly longer (more like Japanese tanka), make use of breaks between the lines, and retain some melodic form.

In Jaccottet's earlier poems, "la fluidité musicale" had been an obvious characteristic, and not the least attractive. Yet he had already written a few fragments as brief and haiku-like as anything in Airs (and so had Ungaretti forty years before). Some are just prose notes in La Semaïson, such as this one dated January 1959: "Lune mince au-dessus des terres brunes, avant le lever du jour". But one found its way into L'Effraie among "Notes pour des poèmes":

O premiers jours de printemps  
jouant dans la cour d'école  
entre deux classes de vent! (P/E, p.41)

One might be tempted to argue from the form of this piece that the influence of the haiku-form on the Airs is negligible. The difference, however, is that these poems are not published as notes or fragments; the author does not imply that they ought to be turned, painstakingly, into

16. (contd) p.10).

17. Sem, p.47 (cf. E1, p.148).

18. In NRF, Nov. 1960, p.905.



proper discursive poems. Their brevity is unapologetic - and it is closer in spirit to that of haiku than to the familiar brevity of epigrams, aphorisms, maxims, and epitaphs. A haiku can be complete in its incompleteness, because it is open to the world and finds its completion there. Blyth explains it thus: "the brevity of haiku [...] is not only a form of expression, but a mode of living more immediately".<sup>19</sup> Such is, I suggest, the lesson that Jaccottet took from the haiku-form - it is by no means a merely formal lesson.

The "disposition de l'âme" that accompanies this form is of greater interest, and we have already seen how Jaccottet stresses it in his article. Yet to say that it "directly" influenced his own creative writing would be to over-simplify. In some ways, as Borel implies, the haiku mentality corresponds to concerns Jaccottet had always had. If haiku record, in Blyth's words, "those moments which for some quite mysterious reason have a peculiar significance",<sup>20</sup> then so did many poems of L'Effraie and L'Ignorant. And the fount of poetry which Jaccottet searched after in La Promenade is very close to Zen, which Blyth describes, in its broadest sense, as "that state of mind in which we are not separated from other things, are indeed identical with them, and yet retain our own individuality and personal peculiarities".<sup>21</sup> The preference shown in La Promenade for natural "vue" rather than supernatural "vision" agrees with the haiku masters. Their delight in the thusness, the

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19. Blyth, op. cit. III, p.v.

20. Ibid, I, p.vii.

21. Ibid, I, p.iii.

"ordinary-wonderfulness"<sup>22</sup> of things was not foreign to Jaccottet (let alone to Ponge, whom he had long admired). His affinity with the Japanese poets was thus even greater than Jacques Masui had guessed when recommending them. And yet for all this I doubt whether the Haiku would have influenced Jaccottet so much had he read them ten years earlier, when he had little in common with their freedom from metaphysics.<sup>23</sup> His thirst for the absolute may have needed to pursue a few more mirages before it could be slaked by the dew that haiku offer, by what Blyth calls "the infinite grasped in the hand, before the eyes, in the hammering of a nail, the touch of cold water, the smell of chrysanthemums, the smell of this chrysanthemum".<sup>24</sup>

Borel's term "confirmation" is certainly far more apt than "conversion" would be: Jaccottet was not in the least moved to alter his style of life, to "respirer à la manière des yogis",<sup>25</sup> let alone to alter what cannot be called his doctrines. But he certainly did reflect upon the lives of the haiku masters - the first poem of Airs, which wonders whether "l'âme errante" might be "celle qui chante/avec la voix la plus pure/les distances de la terre" (P/A, p.95) may have been prompted by these men whom he describes later as .....

22. Ibid, IV, p.240.

23. The poet of L'Effraie would hardly have quoted Bashô's gentle debunking: "Combien digne d'admiration/Qui ne pense point: La vie est fuyante,/En voyant l'éclair!" (Sem, p.55, Aug. 1960).

24. Blyth, op. cit. I, p.xii.

25. Prom, p.146. One may perhaps wonder why not. More adventurous Westerners do explore Oriental mysticism in such ways. Jaccottet is not tempted to try mind-altering drugs either, though struck by the accounts which Michaux and Castaneda give of their experiences (Jou, pp.83-4, March 1974).

"ni des héros, ni des saints, ni des génies", but "des passants invisibles".<sup>26</sup> And he meditated even more on their elusive wisdom, since it lay in the region of truth, perceived in contemplation of the visible world. The briefest of all his poems can be read as a homage to Japan:

Sérénité

L'ombre qui est dans la lumière  
pareille à une fumée bleue. (P/A, p.147)

One of Jaccottet's obvious interests to be confirmed by the Haiku is the timeless world of nature, which had become so important to him since his arrival in Grignan (and confirmation is something he has welcomed when faced with the opinion that a contemporary poet who writes about nature must be "escapist"). In haiku, the presence of nature is guaranteed by the requirement that they convey the feeling of their season, as season being, according to Blyth, "a mode of intuition, a vaster way of seeing particular things".<sup>27</sup> Seasonal references were already common enough in Jaccottet's writings; now they are reinforced and developed, particularly his predilection for winter.<sup>28</sup> The Buddhist philosophy of oneness, which does not view nature in opposition to man, is too much like his dreams not to have provoked some envy.

A different kind of confirmation came from the relative impersonality of haiku. Jaccottet's emphasis on objectivity is probably inappropriate to Japanese literature which does not naturally oppose subject and object: the infrequent use of personal pronouns is, it seems, a characteristic of

26. Montaigne-Preis 1972, p.44.

27. Blyth, op. cit. II, p.v.

28. Especially the opening of Paysages, which first appeared in 1964.

the language and not a special renunciation practised by certain poets; and personal feelings are often implied in haiku about nature. Nevertheless, Japanese poetry is less self-conscious than ours, and Jaccottet was right to associate its serene receptivity with the poets' own disinterestedness. He himself had already, in L'Ignorant, omitted from his verse the autobiographical material - voyages and love-affairs - evident in L'Effraie, and presented a poetic "je" that was, for a European, very discreet. The Haiku showed him that poetry of far greater impersonality had once been produced, inciting him to diminish the amount of reasoning, opinion and philosophy in his poems, and even to restrain the subjective reflection and emotion. The Airs take a long step in this direction - Borel's review of them speaks of "cet impossible surcroît de dépouillement", and claims that "rarement un poète s'était aussi absolument vidé de lui pour n'accueillir que l'objet de son chant".<sup>29</sup>

Those remarks, however, exaggerate the impersonality of these poems and thus their closeness to haiku. Lines like these:

L'âge regarde la neige  
s'éloigner sur les montagnes (P/A, p.96)

may still be construed "I aging watch..." Other poems contain reflective, even confessional material, such as this line (P/A, p.53): "Il faut que le temps m'enseigne", which far from being haiku-like is the wish of a European admitting difficulty in finding enlightenment. In particular, the "Voeux" which conclude Airs belong in Jaccottet's highly conscious, obstinate, and Western reflection on poetry and

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29. In NRF, July 1967, pp.126, 128.

life. Now I do not mean to say that he sought and failed to attain the impersonality of haiku. Was it not more a helpful signpost than an essential destination? Ought we really to regret that in these lines:

Ces eaux, ces feux ensemble dans la combe  
et les montagnes suspendues:  
le coeur me faut soudain,  
comme enlevé trop haut 30

he should have added to the presentation of objects a subjective reaction such as a haiku-poet may have felt but not stated?

In the matter of poetic images, the Haiku brought more than confirmation. Jaccottet agreed with Masui that they answered his wish for a "poésie sans images".<sup>31</sup> His term "images" does not, of course, denote "all visual material": it seems to mean chiefly metaphors, and in a vaguer sense all figures of rhetoric (though some do occur in haiku). This is by no means a mere question of style - it is one of mental approach to experience. Whereas a lot of modern poetry makes extensive use of "le stupéfiant image", Jaccottet's early poems had been relatively sober; but their diction was often artificial. An important shift in approach followed his arrival in Grignan, and can be seen in the prose "exemples" of La Promenade - texts that try to set down elements of landscape without gilding the lily. His suspicion of language and his wistful aspiration for truth developed, in the 1950's, into an obsession with the eradication of "le mensonge". In the Haiku he found a lack of untruth, a peculiar fidelity to

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30. P/A, p.125. Cf. Musil, Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, p.1170: "Ein Mystiker sagt, 'Da ward mir das Herz aus der Brust genommen'". The sight of "les montagnes suspendues" was described in Prom, pp.64-66.

31. In NRF, Nov. 1960, p.906.

reality, coinciding with their lack of "images" - logically enough, in that even the most appropriate metaphor is something other than the thing-in-itself. That Jaccottet was meditating on this issue when he wrote Airs is clearly attested by the line: "J'ai de la peine à renoncer aux images" (P/A, p.137).

But if not by images, how do haiku bestow significance on things? The answer is that they don't: they merely isolate things and relationships, thus somehow revealing the meaning already present in them and experienced by the poet. That Jaccottet should be attracted by this technique is not surprising in view of his own quest for "des signes" in the visible world. The haiku masters had new lessons to offer, they showed mysterious "relations dont la découverte nous illumine au point, dans certains cas, de changer notre vie".<sup>32</sup> We can affirm that they worked at least some change in Jaccottet's poetry. These lines set down just such a mystery:

Une aigrette rose à l'horizon  
un parcours de feu  
et dans l'assemblée des chênes  
la huppe étouffant son nom  
Feux avides, voix cachées  
courses et soupirs (P/A, p.112)

Another poem begins:

Oiseau sorti de la forge  
Dans la poussière de l'après-midi  
dans l'odeur du fumier  
dans la lumière de la place (P/A, p.150)

and then associates this village scene with "l'indestructible". Although the word "feu" is not literal, it is clear that both poems rely not on metaphors but on the stating of relationships between real things. Jaccottet is interrogating things in an

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32. Ibid, p.904.

attempt to work a miracle like that of the Japanese masters. He was not, however, willing to abolish images from his poetry - they are not rare in Airs - it was rather that he sought to restrict himself to metaphors that are not distracting or ornamental,<sup>33</sup> such as this evocation of swifts in flight: "ces faucilles au ras de la paille" (P/A, p.117).

It may be added that, when he revised for Airs those poems that had first appeared in periodicals, his alterations<sup>34</sup> made them more haiku-like rather than less. He omitted more lines than he added, and shortened more than he lengthened. Metaphors are fewer, as are striking "literary" words, and the amount of prosaic commentary on experience is further reduced. In the course of his most drastic revision, that of "Arbres III", Jaccottet cut the third line of his version which had begun:<sup>35</sup>

Arbres magiciens tenaces  
Ajourant lentement la terre  
Montrant le dieu caché...

It is not that he believed less in hidden gods: other texts prove the contrary. It is just that he thought it possible and desirable here to omit such a metaphysical image from a poem concerned, after all, with trees - to leave the idea implicit. Bashô would probably have agreed; and would have approved also Jaccottet's suppression of this image: "Globes de braise/sur l'aire du pommier",<sup>36</sup> which becomes simply

33. In La Promenade, p.115, he gives approval to images which obey "notre plus stricte vérité intérieure".

34. Cf. Cahiers du Sud, June-July 1961; NRF, June 1962 and January 1965; and Ecriture I, Lausanne 1964. These are discussed in greater detail below.

35. Ecriture I, p.24.

36. *Ibid*, p.21. Jaccottet comments on this image in Sem, p.94 (Sept. 1965): "Parler de braise, de globes de braise, comme je l'ai fait dans un poème d'Airs, est une approximation insuffisante, en partie fausse". Another metaphor

"Pommes éparses" (P/A, p.133). Can one imagine a Symbolist or Surrealist approving of that? Such cases show probable Japanese impact on Jaccottet's practical poetics.

Critics and reviewers of Jaccottet's work have been totally silent about Japanese influence outside the Airs. It is unlikely, however, to be non-existent. I think it may be detected as early as the end of L'Obscurité and Eléments, where this sentence appears at about the time the author was reading the Haiku: "Nous sommes peut-être d'un temps où ce qui compte, peut-être, c'est une fleur apparue entre des dalles disjointes, ou même moins encore. Il nous faut simplement montrer cela..." (El, p.173). The later prose-texts of Paysages avec figures absentes contain at least one marvelously Zen-like perception of the significance of the singular:

herbes, coquelicots, terre, bleuets, et ces pas entre  
des milliers de pas, ce jour entre des milliers de  
jours.<sup>37</sup>

More numerous comparisons can be made with La Semaïson.

Some poetic notes here would not be out of place in Airs:

Premiers bourgeons, premières feuilles  
Soirs qui grandissent et s'allègent  
Violettes, pourquoi  
Si sombres, si parfumées? (Sem, p.73, March 1963)

And a few prose-notes are very haiku-like: "Cueillant une grappe de raisin, le soir, et soudain le globe, le grain de

36. (contd) similarly suppressed was "Ce morceau d'or glacé là-haut..." (NRF, Jan. 1965, p.32), which now reads "Une paille très haut..." (P/A, p.107).

37. Pay, p.79. This resembles Prom, p.91: "Ces points du monde où (la mort) règne par la mobilité et la fragilité; par exemple, dans les rivières; et, plus précisément, dans ce fragment de rivière auquel je reviens toujours, ici, entre les arbres et les prés".



la lune; je tiens la grappe dans ma main" (p.116, Oct.1966). I can suggest, at least, that the Haiku made Jaccottet more willing to write such short notes; and may have influenced his decision, taken around 1960, to publish extracts from his notebooks, with little revision, to present them in their greatest immediacy. One recurrent theme of La Semaïson, the fragility of natural beauty,<sup>38</sup> shows very well Jaccottet's affinity with the Japanese sensibility - but here such European antecedents as Rilke and Roud prevent us from speaking of "influence". Ought we to say that the lessons of the haiku-masters are "assimilated" in La Semaïson, or "unrecognizable"? Jaccottet displays at least some of that asceticism of style and feeling which produced their success, and is increasingly on guard, when he writes, against the "artificiality, sentimentality, exaggeration, intellectuality, excessive strain, and cynicism" which Blyth numbers among the enemies of true poetry.<sup>39</sup> Had Jaccottet just set out to make quasi-Japanese verbal experiments, he would have benefited far less.

It remains evident that the impression of the haiku-poets on Jaccottet is limited, and in no way comparable to that of European writers such as Hölderlin, whom he cultivated for decades. I suggest only that Blyth's anthology affected him more than any single work he encountered after he was young - and he is nothing if not a reader of books. It could do so only by being so different from his familiar traditions. In his essay on Roud, Jaccottet speaks of the contradictions in Western literature between the vision of paradise or totality

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38. Most apparent in the text: "Beauté perdue comme une graine..." dated March 1962 (Sem, p.57. Cf. P/A, pp.98, 148, 151).

39. Blyth, op. cit. IV, p.246.

and the perishability of the world, and then says that haiku-poetry, being "étrangère à Athènes autant qu'à Jérusalem", does attain a plenitude that is not otherworldly: "On croirait vraiment que le moindre objet, le moindre moment de ce monde-ci sont habités par une lumière éternelle".<sup>40</sup> This is the chief reason why he so marvelled on first reading the Haiku, and even suggested that they might help to "nous arracher au désordre envahissant".<sup>41</sup>

A corollary of this argument explains why Jaccottet's recent poems have mostly left the vein of Airs. Haiku present moments not of struggle but of resolution - which he then was trying to emulate:

Un instant la mort paraît vaine  
le désir même est oublié... (P/A, p.127)

Or as Blyth expressed it: "Somehow or other, when we read them, all the important things they omit, sex, war, and the struggle for existence generally, do not seem to matter quite so much after all".<sup>42</sup> Since Airs, the pressure of circumstances and the demands of truthfulness have prompted Jaccottet to write more discursively, in Leçons and Chants d'en bas, about

40. Gustave Roud, pp.80-81. Cf. L'Entretien des Muses, p.257: "Il m'arrive de croire que les seuls poètes qui aient su (...) inscrire l'éternel dans le sensible, sont les maîtres japonais du haï-ku. Chez eux, non seulement la trouée se produit à travers le particulier, mais à travers les plus vils objets". Or in Montaigne-Preis 1972, p.43: "Mieux qu'aucune autre poésie (...) elle réussissait, me semblait-il, à illuminer d'infini des moments quelconques d'existences quelconques (...) Comme si, à l'affirmation désespérée de Rimbaud, "la vraie vie est absente", répondait non pas une affirmation contraire (...), mais comme une floraison de signes discrets témoignant d'une vraie vie possible ici et maintenant.

41. In NRF, Nov. 1960, p.908.

42. Blyth, op. cit. IV, p.xxxiv.

human suffering, a theme comparatively neglected by the Japanese masters.

So far we have been considering Airs indirectly, in terms of the influence of the haiku-poets. It is time now to examine these poems more closely, giving full weight to the continuity between them and Jaccottet's earlier writings. In Airs, he is concerned, as always, with the beauty and fragility of the visible world, the precariousness of human life, and those rare experiences of plenitude that can arouse hope and wonder. As one critic has cleverly said: "The poems are in a sense the same poems, but shortened, all elements of exposition or explanation removed from them..."<sup>43</sup>

The first poems of Airs were written early in 1961. Though published originally in two groups,<sup>44</sup> they form a loose sequence of eleven poems under the heading "Fin d'hiver". Of their composition Jaccottet wrote in June of that year:

...dans ces merveilleux mois, s'avéra brusquement ce que j'avais pressenti dans La Promenade, puis oublié: qu'"en fin de compte, il valait mieux ne pas trop s'appesantir"; que les vérités poétiques étaient faites "pour le regard prompt et bientôt détourné d'un oiseau sans poids".

J'obtins ainsi, pendant plusieurs semaines, de ne plus faire obstacle à la lumière extérieure....<sup>45</sup>

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43. G.D. Martin, Anthology of Contemporary French Poetry, Edinburgh 1972, p.202. A good case in point is P/A, p.97, which resembles a particular poem of L'Ignorant (P/I, pp.80-81).
44. The poems on P/A, pages 95, 97, 98 and 102 appeared in the Cahiers du Sud of June-July 1961, with another one omitted from Airs; the remaining seven appeared in the NRF of June 1962, again with an uncollected poem. These sources give a number of variant readings.
45. Prom, p.147, referring back to Prom, p.111, where he had spoken of the benefits of "une justesse inconsciente". For some reason he does not mention his baby daughter, born in 1960.

These poems are indeed light and free of torment. Their subjects are seasonal ones - thawing snow, dawn mists, winter moonlight, smoke from a bonfire, light on tree trunks - simple, everyday subjects from nature looked at with quiet wonder.

Snow, for example, perhaps on the top of Mont Ventoux:

Là où la terre s'achève  
levée au plus près de l'air  
(dans la lumière où le rêve  
invisible de Dieu erre)  
entre pierre et songerie  
cette neige: hermine enfuie<sup>46</sup>

This is probably one of the poems mentioned in Jaccottet's speech of 1972, where he comments on his feelings in this period:

Une expérience à vrai dire étrange, difficile à communiquer et surtout à faire prendre au sérieux: que l'apparition de la neige à la crête d'une montagne, au-delà des arbres défeuillés, que le vol parfaitement rectiligne d'une aigrette dans le ciel, au-dessus des reflets d'un étang, que ces choses sans aucune valeur, que ces hasards naturels et dépourvus de tout sens, se révélassent à mes yeux d'un plus grand secours, pour continuer à vivre, que toutes les doctrines et les prières du monde.<sup>47</sup>

The same speech then turns to Jaccottet's basic image of an opening or passage, thus suggesting that the title Airs, besides being a musical metaphor for poems, refers also to

46. P/A, p.103. The final image of whiteness (and purity) had been noted in April 1960 (Sem, p.50, cf. Pay, p.16). The sound-patterns in this lyric, particularly "terre... air...erre...hermine" are analysed by D. Delas in Romanic Review, March 1975, pp.123-139.

47. Montaigne-Preis 1972, p.43. Cf. Pay, p.19: "j'aperçus au-dessus des murs et des toits, entre les rares arbres, la montagne basse éclairée par le soir, juste veinée de très peu de neige à la cime (...) C'était aussi autre chose, qu'il faudrait le langage des anges pour signifier avec justesse..." (The phrase about the egret alludes not to Airs but to Pay, p.128.)

their light and transparent "airiness":

...c'étaient de simples lueurs, des éclaircies. Comme si, dans l'obscurité impénétrable de notre condition, s'ouvraient des passages, je ne puis mieux dire, des espèces de fenêtres, de perspectives par où pénétraient de nouveau un peu de lumière, un peu d'air. Et ce peu de lumière, ce peu d'air avaient sur moi tant de pouvoir qu'il m'est arrivé de les dire presque divins, c'est-à-dire venus du plus loin, du plus haut.<sup>48</sup>

That final sentence explains, rather diffidently, the use of religious language in poems like the one quoted above: it is not expression of belief, but response to emotion.

Jaccottet has a sense of the mysterious, and sees a place for the words past writers have used to express that sense. But the phrase "le rêve/ invisible de Dieu" is subject to the caution appended to a similar phrase later in Airs:

Divinités de plumes  
(simple image  
ou portant encore sous l'aile  
un vrai reflet)<sup>49</sup>

Such images remain at best imperfect and unreliable; but it would be a pity to suppress them altogether.

The underlying theme of "Fin d'hiver" is human existence, our fragile life of "poussière allumée" (P/A, p.98) in which death is ever-present, like the shadows in the grass (p.97). The epigraph from Joubert is very apt: "Notre vie est du vent tissé". But mortality is not a reason for lament; the axe

48. Ibid, pp.43-4. Cf. P/A, p.113: "De plus loin que le plus loin".

49. P/A, p.121. Other phrases with religious connotations are "un baptême de brebis" (p.100), "la clarté divine" (p.105), and "Je crois que j'ai bu l'autre monde" (p.113). But we must read them above all as poetry - poetry about real birds and trees and seasons which are not esoteric emblems: "Car ce sont les choses qui sont telles, terre et ciel, nuées, sillons, broussailles, étoiles; ce sont les choses seules qui transfigurent, n'étant absolument pas des symboles, étant le monde où l'on respire..." (Pay, p.19).

of time adds, paradoxically, to the brightness of the world.<sup>50</sup> This is poetry of acceptance, in which the author turns from his personal fears to the visible things outside him.<sup>51</sup> Its expression is deliberately impersonal; yet we sense that Jaccottet is writing of his own situation, and we can even detect reference to the crisis his life has undergone. It is the poet himself who consumes the remains of his youth;<sup>52</sup> his sorrow resembles the swollen rivers (P/A, p.96); and he may be seen as an "âme errante" (p.95) who has not completely exorcized "l'effroi de perdre l'espace" which had produced L'Obscurité. It is the poet too who tells his wife of his hope to be rekindled from ash through the vitality of nature:

Ô compagne du ténébreux  
entends ce qu'écoute sa cendre  
afin de mieux céder au feu:  
  
les eaux abondantes descendre  
aux degrés d'herbes et de roches  
et les premiers oiseaux louer  
la toujours plus longue journée  
la lumière toujours plus proche (P/A, p.104)

That beautiful lyric of early spring is deceptive in its simplicity. In fact it observes traditional prosody and could be printed as two quatrains of octosyllabes, with six perfect rhymes and a double assonance "louer/journée" - this rich phonic patterning certainly contributes to its intensity.

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50. P/A, p.105 echoes the phrase used in Sem, p.27 (Nov. 1959): "il ne naît de sourire que sous la hache/ du temps". Clerval remarks (p.59): "Cette clarté divine, à qui la hache donne force, est l'image d'une ardeur qui tire, du principe qui la ruine, un nouveau dynamisme et le moyen de conjurer son extinction".
51. An uncollected poem first published with these ones is even more explicit: "La terreur de n'être rien,/ je l'ai donnée à la terre/ comme fumier pour un grain/ qui fera fendre les pierres./ Peur en pâture à la peur/ Mort, si maternelle aux fleurs". (NRF, June 1962, p.1006).
52. P/A, p.101. The "tu" of line five is probably himself also. Cf. p.117: "au moment hagard de la vie".

Unlike the later Airs, "Fin d'hiver" is not metrically adventurous - every line can be read as either an octosyllabe or a heptasyllabe - and much use is made of rhyme and assonance.<sup>53</sup> In short, these poems are more melodious than their successors, most of which lack phonic structure.

The second sequence in Airs is longer and more heterogeneous.<sup>54</sup> Its title, "Oiseaux, fleurs et fruits", invites us to consider first of all the spectacle of nature: birds are named in several poems (but not the first); flowers appear in the second; and there is a memorable evocation of fruit on pages 119-20. The season now is summer, observed at various moments of the day and night. It is a season of languid calm and sudden thunder, above all of heat - denoted by words like "feu", "ardeur", "braise", "tison" and "incendie", which supply a recurrent motif. Sometimes the elements of nature are simply named, but often they are seized in brief metaphors: fruits are called lamps or pearls or pendants (P/A, p.119), leaves are green eyelids or shining sparks (pp.119, 125), clouds become swans (p.121) and a mountain is called a haystack (p.118) - all images which attempt to catch the visual reality of the objects.

53. These poems are thus not unlike some earlier ones, such as "Les Gitans" (P/I, p.67). Later in Airs there is only one fully rhymed poem (P/A, p.151). Cid Corman, in translating the pretty poem of p.102 as "Out of the chamber of the beautiful/ rose..." (Jaccottet, Breathings, N.Y. 1974, p.48), ignores the octosyllabic rhythm. "Belle" must be a noun, and "rose" an adjective qualifying "fuyard". J.-P. Richard analyses the alliterations and assonances of "Lune à l'aube d'été" (P/A, p.99 in Onze études sur la poésie moderne, pp.272-3).

54. It comprised 19 poems in the 1967 edition, of which 12 had appeared, with some variants, in the NRF (Jan. 1965, pp.32-6). A twentieth one "L'ombre lentement des nauages..." appears only in the 1971 edition (P/A, p.121).

The brevity of the poems and the discontinuities between them mean that each presents a concentrated, immediate fragment of the world, an isolated moment. The feeling is sometimes one of extreme emotion:

Moment où l'on dirait  
que la source même prend feu (P/A, p.123)  
Tout crie soudain plus haut  
que ne peut gravir l'ouïe (p.117)

There is a sense here of being fully and miraculously in touch with reality. And Jaccottet even has recourse to the language of ecstasy: "le coeur me faut soudain, / comme enlevé trop haut" (P/A, p.125), and declares at the end of the sequence:

Un instant la mort paraît vaine (p.127)

In general, however, there is less serenity than in "Fin d'hiver", and more agitation: the experiences evoked are often ambiguous and sometimes troubling. The poet may declare once, "Je crois que j'ai bu l'autre monde" (P/A, p.113), but more often the idyll he imagines is out of reach: "une coupe embuée/ où la bouche ne peut pas boire" (p.115). We can try to understand this through Jaccottet's notion of limits. Man's advance to knowledge is blocked by obstacles, beyond which is mystery: "l'au-delà de sa limite, l'en-dehors absolu, conçu tantôt comme effrayant, tantôt comme adorable" (Obs, p.94). The beauty of flowers has this obscure, intangible source:

Toute fleur n'est que de la nuit  
qui feint de s'être rapprochée  
Mais là d'où son parfum s'élève  
je ne puis espérer entrer

...  
Toute couleur, toute vie  
naît d'où le regard s'arrête (p.108)

This is a poetic expression of something stated more generally in Eléments (p.147): "nous n'étions jamais plus vivants, plus



réels, plus certains de notre réalité et de la réalité du monde que lorsque nous atteignons ce point où notre pensée s'arrête, lorsque nous atteignait, plutôt, ce lieu impossible". The source of beauty in art and poetry is likewise this "illimité".<sup>55</sup> And so at times the poet is determined to cross the limit, by means of his "regard rapace" (P/A, p.114), or his striding ambition:

Où nul ne peut demeurer ni entrer  
voilà vers quoi j'ai couru  
la nuit venue  
comme un pillard (p.126)

Success can be only momentary, however, and in this poem he abandons haste in favour of patient hope:

Puis j'ai repris le roseau qui mesure  
l'outil du patient<sup>56</sup>

Another poem introduces a classical symbol of passage into the beyond, the obol for Charon:

Cette flamme, ou larme inversée:  
une obole pour le passeur (p.111)

In other words, the flame may keep its power, small though it is, even past the threshold of death.<sup>57</sup>

Alongside this theme of hidden mysteries is a discreet theme of separation in love, of communication "d'un corps à l'autre" (P/A, p.107). The heat motif is allied closely to the idea of the poet's own ardour - and this accounts for the

55. See Sem, p.39 (March 1960): "L'illimité est le souffle qui nous anime. L'obscur est un souffle..." The word "nuit" in line one of poem quoted is best explained in these terms.

56. P/A, p.126. This is a rare Biblical allusion, to the reed used in measuring the new Jerusalem (Revelation ch. XI, v.1; ch.XXI, v.15; Ezekiel ch.XL, v.3). Clerval comments (p.29): "Il y a, en Jaccottet, un géomètre qui ne se lasse pas d'explorer les limites du visible..."

57. Such is the sense of "obole" in Sem, p.26 (Nov. 1959). In L'Obscurité, however, the master insists that "il n'y a ni âmes, ni fleuve, ni passeur" (Obs, p.74).

various feminine perquisites mentioned in the sequence:  
 pearls, lace, silk, fans. A woman's presence is most  
 apparent in these lines (addressed to the voluptuous clouds  
 of evening):

et maintenant je la regarde  
 au milieu de son linge et de ses clefs d'écaille  
 sous votre plumage éperdue (p.121)

In other places she is absent, but her inaccessibility can  
 affect the poet's perceptions, so that sounds and sights can  
 remind him of her:

Dans cette douce ardeur du jour  
 il n'est que de faibles rumeurs  
 (marteaux que l'on croirait  
 talons marchant sur des carreaux)  
 en des lieux éloignés de l'air  
 et la montagne est une meule  
 Ah! qu'elle flambe enfin  
 avec l'ambre tombé à terre  
 et le bois de luth des cloisons! (p.118)

The "elle" of line 9 is the mountain, but seems to suggest the  
 woman also, and its amber colour perhaps a necklace. The  
 poet is impatient for a fiery end to all the flimsy "cloisons"  
 that obstruct his desire.

Erotic elements form there an important counterpoint to  
 the poet's quest for a plenitude in which finally "le désir  
 même est oublié" (P/A, p.127). But to attach precise meanings  
 to each of these poems would be to restrict unduly the reader's  
 role in interpretation. As G.D. Martin has explained, the  
 poet works by suggestion rather than statement, references are  
 imprecise, words can gain mysterious weight, and the literal  
 may fuse with the metaphoric: "everything (or almost every-  
 thing) is psychological overtone".<sup>58</sup> These poems are thus

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58. G.D. Martin, Language, Truth and Poetry, Edinburgh, 1975,  
 p.199. The poem he analyses is "Tout à la fin de la  
 nuit" (P/A, p.111), which actually gives a vaguer picture  
 than most of the Airs. It also contains a key word,

more specifically modern in technique than Jaccottet had written previously.

The third sequence of Airs belongs to autumn: "Champ d'octobre".<sup>59</sup> It is allied to the preceding group by various references to birds, and one impatient poem about fruit:

Vite!  
Que la peau s'empourpre  
avant l'hiver!<sup>60</sup>

In this season there is more sense of open space than in summer, because of the golden weather, perhaps, or the thinner foliage. Distance and expanse fascinate the poet's eye, so that he gives several brief evocations of clarity and light:

La terre toute entière visible  
mesurable  
pleine de temps  
suspendue à une plume qui monte  
de plus en plus lumineuse (p.132)

Here as elsewhere in Airs,<sup>61</sup> altitude, weightlessness and suspension produce a feeling of exceptional plenitude. The

58.(contd) "obole" - which is quite untypical: the only analogies are "Viatique" on p.150, and perhaps "baptême" on p.100, where the moon comes to signify purification from the obscurity of death. Now Dr Martin describes its difficult style as the poet's deliberate "weapon", overstating what seems merely a consequence of its brevity: to declare that demonstratives like "ce souffle" are "used for the purpose of emphasizing the words" (Ibid, p.200) is to confuse effect with intention - Jaccottet was merely withholding, as haiku-poets do, such prosaic explanations as "ce souffle qui entre par ma fenêtre". Nevertheless, these are the obscurest of his poems; and Dr Martin characterizes very well the kind of poetry they represent, in contrast with others (including the kind found in L'Ignorant).

59. It first appeared, complete, in the Lausanne journal Ecriture (No.I, 1964, pp.19-26). This shows a number of variants, including the title, which was "Aire d'octobre".

60. P/A, p.133, cf. pp.119-20, 123.

61. In P/A, p.99 there are mists forming a "demeure suspendue". Cf. pp.125, 143; and also Prom, pp.64-6, Obs, p.141, Sem, p.130, and Pay, pp.19, 68.

rising feather is a defiance of gravity, and its growing brightness is a small but true reply to the frequent darkness and opacity of the world - a "sign". Birds and clouds can sometimes work the same miracle. The imagination is carried upwards into communication with another order, it seems, beyond death:

Et des nuages très haut dans l'air bleu  
qui sont des boucles de glace  
la buée de la voix  
que l'on écoute à jamais tue (p.143)

Three particularly noteworthy poems in this sequence are about trees. For the second of them Jaccottet provided a commentary in the contemporary prose-text about the landscapes of Grignan:

Peut-être même était-ce parce qu'il n'y avait plus en eux de marques évidentes du Divin que celui-ci y parlait avec tant de persévérance et de pureté (...) C'est ce que j'ai voulu dire à la fin d'un petit poème où le regard, entre des arbres, croyait s'avancer d'une grotte de verdure à l'autre, jusqu'à la plus lointaine, mystérieuse, comme sacrée, où l'on eût attendu en d'autres temps quelque stèle:

Peut-être maintenant qu'il n'y a plus de stèle,  
N'y a-t-il plus d'absence ni d'oubli...<sup>62</sup>

"Arbres I" and "Arbres III" (P/A, pp.138, 140) offer even greater insight into Jaccottet's mind, since both differ considerably from the early versions that appeared in 1964.<sup>63</sup>

These read as follows, with the later versions on the right:

De la confusion funèbre	Du monde confus, opaque
Où se mêlent l'ivoire et l'ombre	des ossements et des graines
Ils s'arrachent avec patience	ils s'arrachent avec patience
Pour ne toucher au vent	afin d'être chaque année
Qu'avec ces éventails	plus criblés d'air
...	...

62. Pay, p.32, quoting from P/A, p.139. Cf Obs, pp.97-8.

63. Ecriture I, pp.23-24. This despite Jaccottet's recent claim that, except for Leçons, he never revised his poems radically: "Cette hésitation à corriger, à retoucher un texte confine même à la superstition" (NRF, March 1976, p.66).

Arbres magiciens tenaces  
 Ajourant lentement la terre  
 Montrant le dieu caché  
 Multiplié en flammes et en feuilles  
 Ramifiant l'obscur en autant de  
     miroirs du jour

Ainsi le coeur purifiant  
 Ainsi le trouble du coeur  
 Puisse-t-il s'achever  
 En source

Arbres, travailleurs tenaces  
 ajourant peu à peu la terre  
 Ainsi le coeur endurent  
 peut-être, purifie

In revision, "Arbres I" has been shorn of the literary word "funèbre" in favour of "opaque", which offers a good contrast with the final lines. The metaphor "ivoire" gives way to the literal "ossements"; and "éventails" is replaced by the less precious image "criblés d'air". Thus the final version has less poetic artifice and more reality.<sup>64</sup>

"Arbres III" is pared quite severely. As V. Godel remarked with approval, "Jaccottet se soumet à une règle austère".<sup>65</sup> Indeed, few people would say of the early version: "Far too long - needs complete revision!". Yet by eliminating the striking metaphors "magiciens" and "miroirs", the religious phrase "dieu caché" and various other redundancies, Jaccottet has given the poem an exceptional strength of concision - one might call it aphoristic, but for the characteristic "peut-être" introduced into the last line.

An important notion in both these poems is that of patient tenacity, which was, of course, part of Jaccottet's "ethical poetics" in Eléments. Here it is conveyed as a lesson of

64. It may be contrasted with the end of "Le Livre des morts" (P/I, p.92), where the word "funèbre" is used. J.-P. Richard's discussion of the "valeur rêveuse de l'arbre" (op. cit. p.263) applies well to this poem; but his quotation "quelque chose qui se nourrit du sol pour mieux s'élever vers la légèreté des hauteurs en éclairant, en animant ce qui l'entoure" actually comes from Eléments (p.76) and is about fire.

65. In Le Thyse, Nov.-Dec. 1967, p.51 - a comment prompted by this trimming of "Arbres III", which Godel had anthologized (in its earlier form) in Le Thyse of 1965.

nature,<sup>66</sup> and forms a contrast with the images of natural movement (often rapid flight) which prevailed in "Oiseaux, fleurs et fruits".<sup>67</sup>

The latter sections of Airs are no longer tied to a particular season. The seven poems of "Monde" are more general, while the longer poem "Lever du jour" evokes a specific time of day,<sup>68</sup> and the "Voeux" at the end are introspective. As before, the poet is concerned with the world we perceive and inhabit. And here his sense of its ambiguities is particularly keen:

Maintenant ses feuilles bougent  
maintenant c'est un arbre immense  
dont je touche le bois navré  
Et la lumière à travers lui  
brille de larmes<sup>69</sup>

Beauty is totally vulnerable:

Il n'est plus un repli d'elle<sup>70</sup>  
qui ne soit en proie au rapace

There is therefore sadness as well as exaltation in these poems about the first stirrings of dawn, or the deep drowsiness of flowers - and even in the unusual image which the poet

66. Cf. Sem, p.34, where the word "tenace" is underlined.

67. Esp. P/A, p.116: "Je ne veux plus me poser/ voler à la vitesse du temps". To this dialectic in Airs we could apply Jaccottet's later remarks on Rilke's imagery: "Pour Rilke comme naguère pour Hölderlin, il y a une bonne et une mauvaise immobilité, un mouvement bon et un autre mauvais (...) La bonne immobilité, c'est la patience, l'attente, l'ouverture, le bon mouvement, ou le mouvement pur, c'est l'élan désintéressé, sans but... (Rilke par lui-même, p.41).

68. Omitted from Poésie 1946-1967, the nine brief sections of "Lever du jour" are more unified than the preceding sequences and were not assigned separate pages in Airs (1967, pp.73-6). Jaccottet had showed his predilection for daybreak already, in P/A, pp.99, 107, 124, 127, 136, 149, and elsewhere (e.g. P/I, pp.53-8).

69. P/A, p.148. Cf. Airs, p.76: "La lumière(...) peut-elle être éternelle/ ainsi vêtue de larmes..."

70. Airs, p.75. Cf. P/A, p.151: "Monde né d'une déchirure".

associates with serenity:

L'ombre qui est dans la lumière  
pareille à une fumée bleue (P/A, p.147)

A longer version of those two lines appears in La Semaïson:

"Cette fumée un instant dans la lumière, cet adieu qui est encore un moment au-dessus de la terre, de la chambre, mon seul savoir..."<sup>71</sup> Somehow, to Jaccottet, the presence of this shadow betokens a deeper truth.

Another "sign" of lightness and mystery - the bird - reappears in a dense poem with a religious title, "Viatique":

Oiseau sorti de la forge  
...  
Puisses-tu seulement  
l'avoir vu sans le comprendre  
avant de changer de village  
N'était-ce pas  
l'indestructible? (P/A, p.150)

The pronoun "tu" seems to refer to the bird,<sup>72</sup> which may have glimpsed something of truth and sacramental power that may aid it in its journey, and perhaps even in death. But that is not certain; and the poem is formed by two unanswered questions.

Similarly the lyric "Poids des pierres, des pensées" (P/A, p.145) expresses not a philosophical theory but a mysterious intuition. Jaccottet later quotes this in Paysages, with the comment:

C'est ainsi que j'ai essayé de saisir en poème, un jour, ce sentiment qu'il doit y avoir deux mesures, deux ordres de mesure; parce que ce que nous vivons, douleur ou joie, dans une vie, ou même en un bref instant, nous

71. Sem, p.66 (Sept.1962). Cf. Requiem, p.35: "...la lumière, aimée pour ses blessures d'ombre..." and Obs, p.141: "c'était quelque chose qui flottait dans la lumière, un accord d'ombres et de fumées dorées, je pourrais presque dire maintenant, si je ne craignais d'en altérer la simplicité, que c'était une exhalaison d'encens, une chose céleste, le mouvement de la lumière au sein de la lumière".

72. Birds are apostrophized elsewhere (Pay, p.48). An alternative interpretation would make "le" denote the bird, seen as a representative of the eternal order (cf. Obs, p.167). The words would then be addressed to an unnamed traveller.

comprenons bien que c'est sans rapport avec les millions, les milliards d'années ou de kilomètres de la science(...) Ce sentiment d'échapper par quelque côté, ou d'avoir en soi une part essentiellement réfractaire, au nombre, ce pourrait être l'ébauche d'une espérance.<sup>73</sup>

We live not always and only in a world of limits, but in "encore un autre monde", as the poem says - or rather asks.

Jaccottet cannot draw firm conclusions from these poetic insights; he lacks the confidence to do so. As he said on the first page of Airs, he retains "peu de chose".<sup>74</sup> His concern is to say in poetry, "avec la voix la plus pure", the few fragile truths that come his way. And it is this unusual concentration on exceptional moments that is most responsible for the book's lyrical intensity, which surpasses the elegiac intensity of L'Ignorant. This could not be achieved without the omission of discursive, reflective and confessional elements (and, quite appropriately, almost all punctuation). The best poems of Airs are unpretentious ones close in spirit to Japanese haiku, singing the simple ineffable pleasures of light in the distance, or fruit close at hand. As Jacques Borel puts it: "par la voix la plus impersonnelle, et pourtant la plus singulière, c'est le monde lui-même qui surgit, qui s'exhale et se chante".<sup>75</sup>

Around these sparse words, however, is often an unfriendly silence. The poet knows that "le chant" cannot give him permanent protection (P/A, p.154), that any progress he makes

73. Pay, pp.172-3. Cf. Sem, pp.112-3 (July 1966) and p.122 (Nov. 1966): "Il y aurait le monde du nombre, et un autre monde qui ne serait ni intérieur ni extérieur à celui-ci".

74. P/A, p.95. Cf. Sem, p.58 (March 1962): "Cent fois je l'aurai dit: ce qui me reste est presque rien".

75. NRF, July 1967, p.129.



is slow, and pathetic:

On avance peu à peu  
comme un colporteur  
d'une aube à l'autre (p.149)

Rare illuminations do occur - "j'ai vu la chose nacrée" (p.153). But there is no note of triumph; and the poet wonders whether his way forward may be to include more about the difficulty of life:

Peut-être en mêlant peu à peu  
la peine avec la lumière  
avancerai-je d'un pas?<sup>76</sup>

And his final vow is to rely on modest vigilance, to "mettre de l'ordre dans le proche", since to do that

gagne dans l'étendue  
comme le bruit d'une cloche  
autour de soi (p.155)

Before leaving the poems of Airs, we should consider further some of the problems they pose to the reader. These prompted the following harsh criticism from an English reviewer: "Many are marred by a tendency towards loose, "literary" imagery full of fire and smoke and eternity(...) only occasionally do they succeed in communicating an intensely personal experience".<sup>77</sup> As in much modern poetry, there are lines where the poet's intention cannot be discerned, images which fail to bear the load that seems to be placed on them, and irksome ambiguities of reference. A reader familiar with Jaccottet's other writings can overcome many of these difficulties, but probably not all of them. And the deliberately

76. P/A, p.153. Cf. Sem, p.98 (March 1966): "Mon rêve d'accorder, dans le poème, le meilleur et le pire..."

77. In TLS, 24 Aug. 1967, p.764, unsigned. Fire and smoke is indeed common; but the word "éternel" appears only once, and Jaccottet's revisions prove that he wanted to reduce literary and metaphysical language.

restricted vocabulary can certainly seem "literary" to lovers of English poetry. In Airs, the elemental words "jour", "lumière", "nuit", "terre", "air", "oiseau", "monde", "aube" and "montagne" all occur eight times or more. By repeating them, instead of choosing different synonyms, the poet creates verbal echoes throughout the sequences, at the cost of a certain vagueness.<sup>78</sup> And the brevity of the poems tends to compound the difficulty, although (as the reviewer admits) it sometimes makes them more memorable and intense.

The truth is that this poetry calls for some active participation from the reader. In the case of Airs, the appropriate reading strategy generally resembles that required by haiku: to look for things rather than metaphors, and to reconstruct the implied scene and season. Often there is little to "latch on to"; yet that little can sometimes lead us to a remarkable clarity. In this poem, for example:

LUNE A L'AUBE D'ETE

Dans l'air de plus en plus clair  
scintille encore cette larme  
ou faible flamme dans du verre  
quand du sommeil des montagnes  
monte une vapeur dorée

Demeure ainsi suspendue  
sur la balance de l'aube  
entre la braise promise  
et cette perle perdue<sup>79</sup>

the reader may not immediately realise that "demeure" (l.6) is a noun and that "cette larme" and "cette perle" (ll.2,9) are both images for the moon. With time and imagination one

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78. These words are primarily visual (as are "feu" and "fumée") rather than symbolic. And Yves Bonnefoy argues (in Un Rêve fait à Mantoue, pp.104-9) that French poets have a greater need than English poets to use basic elemental words, for example "pierre" rather than "brique".

79. P/A, p.99. J.-P. Richard calls these lines "merveilleux", and analyses their "extrême subtilité sonore" (Richard, op. cit. pp.272-3).

deduces that this is no crescent moon, but a full one. And it must be about to sink in the west, since the sun is rising in the east. Moon and sun thus form the two sides of a "balance" - and that word (which may have seemed loose and "poetic") proves to be a very precise spatial observation. Having grasped that, the reader may well withdraw any wish that the poem were longer or easier than it is.

Nevertheless, this is not the sort of poetry one can read all the time - as the title Airs implies, it is "rarefied". And the poet couldn't write it all the time either. His subsequent poems are very different, as we shall see in the next chapter.

From the period just after Airs comes the second part of La Semaïson. Dated 1963-67, it contains notes made above all in January 1964, September 1965 and May-December 1966. Some of these are notes on reading - Jaccottet mentions more writers than ever, quoting, for example, from Parmenides, Plotinus, Chestov and Borges (French authors are in the minority). But most are observations of nature, as were most of the notes in the first part. The poems that accompany them, however, do not much resemble the poetic fragments of 1958-60. Their style is at times very close to that of Airs:

Rien que l'air lumineux  
et quelque part ce feu qui dort  
Plus rien que cela en ce jour  
l'immense monde  
la maison des oiseaux  
et le nid du sommeil (Sem, p.74, June 1963)

The shorter prose-notes - more numerous and more impressive than the poems - likewise recall Airs, suggesting the brief landscapes of the haiku-poets. Here are three examples:

Le petit pêcher rose, dans la distance, sur un coin de pré vert clair. Rien que cela, flèche qui creuse au plus profond de nous. (p.97, March 1966)

Iris, leur bleu pâle, leur légèreté, leur ciel - éclaircie - sous les feuilles, dans la verdure croissante. (p.128, May 1967)

Automne: pluie sur les flammes. Paysage enflammé et froid. Fleurs, brume, humidité. Si la pluie même brûlait. (p.141, Nov. 1967)

Trees and flowers, different weathers and times of day - these are typical subjects, as they were in the earlier notebooks. So too are hills and combes, villages and birds, evoked in simple, careful, economical words.

Almost every page is set either in Grignan or in some neighbouring part of Provence, and attests to Jaccottet's continuing love for these landscapes. His sense of their serenity and antiquity is discussed particularly in a long note of May 1966:

Il nous semble qu'il y a encore partout des stèles éparses, des traces de temples (...) Nous rencontrons, nous traversons souvent des lieux, alors qu'ailleurs il n'y en a plus. Qu'est-ce qu'un lieu? Une sorte de centre mis en rapport avec un ensemble. Non plus un endroit détaché, perdu, vain. En ce point jadis on dressait des autels, des pierres. C'est l'évidence au val des Nymphes...<sup>80</sup>

He goes on as follows:

... Dans les lieux, il y a communication entre les mondes, entre le haut et le bas; et parce que c'est un centre, on n'éprouve pas le besoin d'en

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80. Sem, p.104, his emphases. This alludes to a text already written: "Il y a un certain lieu de cette contrée qui est une combe presque déserte (...) Tout au fond, au pied de rochers couverts de lierre, sous de grands chênes, une source coule (...) Tout auprès s'élève une chapelle, qui fut un petit temple; et l'on peut voir encore, dans l'église du village voisin, un autel dédié aux nymphes que ce temple honorait (...) cet appel que j'entendais venait de très loin, du temps presque impossible à imaginer où l'on croyait que les dieux habitaient les sources, les arbres, les montagnes..." (Pay, p.25. The same text, Pay, pp.17-18, is mentioned on Sem, p.124).

partir, il y règne un repos, un recueillement. Notre église, c'est peut-être cet enclos aux murs démantelés ou poussent silencieusement des chênes, que traversent parfois un lapin, une perdrix.<sup>81</sup>

One can distinguish a "lieu" from a mere "endroit" by a certain order or harmony - things have meaning and relate to one another. This idea is very similar to those of Yves Bonnefoy, who declares: "L'universel a son lieu".<sup>82</sup> Thus Jaccottet's deeper concern with the "true" or the "sacred" underlies his preoccupation with landscape. Behind the visible phenomena of particular places he senses something invisible and elusive:

Qu'est-ce qui se passe de central et de profond, dont nous ne voyons que les émanations multiples, les projections à l'infini, et de quelle graine commune sont issus et ne cessent de sortir au dehors ces oiseaux, ces sueurs, ces pierres? Parfois, il nous semble que de soudaines ouvertures se creusent devant nous dont la direction désigne un centre(...) Apparences, comme autant d'appels. (Sem, p.76, March 1964)

And even in notes much more descriptive than that one, Jaccottet never writes about "mere landscape". There is, in J.-P. Amette's words, "une question métaphysique absolument centrale, posée à chaque page"<sup>83</sup> - and this provides the

81. Loc. cit. The idea of a centre, "foyer" or "noyau" appears also in Pay, pp.11 and 31. A text published in 1970 (Pay, pp.122-4) develops these reflections, with a further reference to the Val des Nymphes.

82. L'Improbable, p.22. Bonnefoy goes on to write (p.23): "Ici (le vrai lieu est toujours un ici), ici la réalité muette ou distante et mon existence se rejoignent, se convertissent, s'exaltant dans la suffisance de l'être. Beauté d'un lieu de cette sorte, mais extrême, où je ne m'appartiendrais plus, gouverné, assumé par sa parfaite ordonnance". Jaccottet's essay on Bonnefoy, entitled "Vers le 'vrai lieu'", dates from 1967 (L'Entretien des Muses, pp.251-7).

83. In NRF, Feb. 1972, p.87. The reviewers were dealing with the full volume of "carnets 1954-1967". The 1963-67 part cannot be said to contain reflective material as memorable (or as anguished) as some of the notes of 1959-60.

book's basic unity, and accounts for much of its readability.

La Semaïson is subjective without becoming confessional or autobiographical. Even in impersonal observations of scenery, the author says (or implies) that he is moved by what he sees and that he wants to know why. A simple example is this note of April 1965, reflecting his sense of order in nature:

Plus loin, un bosquet de hauts trembles, et à leurs pieds des troncs sciés, de grandes pierres blanches en assemblée: une fois de plus le lieu d'une combinaison comme sacrée, en tout cas mystérieuse et touchante, d'éléments naturels sous une lumière frêle et pure. (p.88)

A less typical, indeed startling example is this note of October 1967, which juxtaposes an evening landscape with a trembling unanswerable question:

Il y a eu d'abord un moment vers la ferme du Devès et la Grangette où, une fois de plus, la terre même et la montagne sont devenues presque transparentes (mais c'est peu dire, et mal), simples écrans devant une lumière intérieure, sous un ciel qui n'était plus que lumière lui-même.

Alors m'est remontée à l'esprit la question: quel rapport, quel lien entre la mort et le fait que nous voyons, que nous buvons des yeux cela, ce vin de la lumière? (p.138)

After these words he returns abruptly to the colour of the sky, as if the world itself were the best reply available, better than the reflections on religious themes given by Jaccottet himself or the wise men he quotes. And yet to describe alone is not enough, because, as he said in an earlier note, "la surprise, l'émotion venaient d'un foyer plus secret, antérieur à la description" (p.83, Feb. 1964)

Seeing and thinking: La Semaïson works by an alliance between these two modes. The review which best defined its unusual appeal, an unsigned one the Times Literary Supplement, declared:

One feeds on Philippe Jaccottet's books with an unhurrying delight, in a state of constant quiet surprise.(...) He writes to establish truth, convinced that beauty will be the result (...) He is speculative and metaphysical, but his metaphysics is grounded in a subtly textured awareness of fact(...). There is much here to enjoy and ponder...<sup>84</sup>

The fragmentary character of these notebooks indeed adds to their richness, and tends to emphasize the intractability of things and the uncertainty of the observer, whose flashes of intuition retain their spontaneity and their open-endedness. Ideas and images jostle one another. Threads are played with, discarded, picked up again, and dropped. And the reader is not led to a fixed destination (Jaccottet knows of none), but permitted rather to share in an exploration.

The notes vary in size from a few words to a few pages. The briefest are the most quotable:

Oiseaux nourris de vers. Capables de voler à force d'avoir mangé de la terre. (p.103, May 1966)

One can indeed ponder the implications of that sudden remark, at once marvellous and banal. But the longer observations show us better how Jaccottet's mind advances towards a subject. One text that invites fuller commentary is the note of May 1967 on page 130. Here is the opening:

Reste magique pour moi la présence, au-delà d'un champ proche et d'arbres à contre-jour, bourdonnants de vent, de la montagne basse sous le ciel presque blanc; de la montagne comme un peu de ciel moins clair...

Jaccottet refers here to his past interest in this subject - without actually alluding to La Promenade (pp.57-67), he explicitly takes up a motif from past contemplations. The hill in question may well be the Mont Ventoux, named a few pages before. Jaccottet describes the foreground first, and then repeats the word "montagne" - but the last phrase is no poetic afterthought; being more evocative than the preceding  
84. In TLS, 11 Feb. 1972, p.146.

phrase, it shows to advantage Jaccottet's incremental technique.

...Qu'est-ce donc?

Vu d'ici, un dôme, un dos d'âne aplati au-dessus duquel le ciel est encore plus lumineux. Sans volume, sans relief, sans détails; s'élevant au-dessus des arbres, et là où cela touche leurs cimes, également plus lumineux; d'où l'impression que c'est léger, suspendu ou flottant.

For a moment his gaze becomes more analytical; the precise diction recalls Francis Ponge. Jaccottet will not be carried away by the illusion of weightlessness, he seeks and finds a non-magical explanation for it.

Couleur? A peine une couleur: comme de fumées dans l'air.

No verb. No art of composition. We are beside the author as he works through a sort of checklist on his jotter. And indeed he is very interested in colour, and seldom content with single adjectives like "blanc" or "bleu". But now he turns from description to reflection:

Jusqu'ici j'avais deviné un élément essentiel de cette magie: la légèreté. Ce matin, je crois en découvrir un autre. Difficile à définir. Cela m'a saisi comme je me retournais. C'était (je crois bien) comme s'il y avait eu à ma gauche une présence (amicale), quelqu'un (une protection?). Peut-être lié à des souvenirs d'enfance.

He is trying to put his finger on something buried in the subconscious, not for the sake of psychoanalysis, but for the truth and poetry of it (rather in the manner of Bachelard). The single words in brackets betray the tentativeness, the provisionality of his statement. "Good style" would, of course, condemn so many parentheses; but in notebooks we can accept such clumsiness as proceeding from the author's genuine uncertainty. We follow his probing all the closer for this tension in the language.

Comme si, aussi loin qu'aïlle ma mémoire, j'avais



toujours eu à ma gauche cette présence bleue, nullement pesante ou hostile, au contraire favorable. Une fois de plus, je crois que c'est pour moi une autre image de la limite heureuse, de celle qui n'enferme pas.  
Montagne - maison.

This paragraph is more assured: Jaccottet has related this new idea of presence to his recurrent theme of "la limite" and "l'illimité", alluding particularly to the note of pages 108-9. Usually he conceives of limits as restrictive, as obstacles to contact with the beyond. But "la limite heureuse" implies rightness, order, and "mesure"; it is conducive to appropriate human existence.

There the reflection breaks off, and the page ends on a single image, "Montagne - maison", too bald to be really successful, which nevertheless suggests the notion of habitability contained elsewhere in the words "patrie" and "demeure".

The passage as a whole is no anthology-piece. Yet as an inquiry into why people enjoy gazing at hills it is very interesting. And the style, casual but not careless, effectively involves the reader in this inquiry. Any lack of clarity seems due to the difficult, elusive nature of the subject.

The difficulty of writing, mentioned here, is a frequent theme in these notebooks - and it is not a mere literary matter, although questions of poetics are also raised. The problem is to write something true and worthwhile:

Ce qui me rend aujourd'hui l'expression difficile est que je ne voudrais pas tricher - et il me semble que la plupart trichent, plus ou moins, avec leur expérience propre... (p.90, Sept. 1965)

Pour moi, de plus en plus, j'entends le mensonge des paroles, ce qui me paralyse...<sup>85</sup>

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85. Sem, p.98, March 1966. Cf. p.58 (March 1962): "C'est

It is not enough to write agreeable words, even impressive ones; they cannot be beautiful, in Jaccottet's view, when they are false. The requirement of truth, however, demands that the writer take account of the reality of suffering:

J'ai cette ombre de la douleur derrière moi maintenant quoi que j'écrive, elle me fait paraître trop fluides tous les poèmes que j'ai écrits, mais presque, aussi bien, toute phrase. Puisque aucun mot n'est douleur, au contraire, se trouve détaché, intact.<sup>86</sup>

He criticizes there not only his work in L'Ignorant but also the less fluid poems of Airs, which were even more detached from darkness and pain.

After 1964-65, Jaccottet indeed writes with less serenity: there are various reminders of his morbid anxieties at the time of L'Obscurité. Thus he declares in June 1966:

J'ai longtemps éloigné les plaies  
Avec des passages d'oiseaux  
J'étais entouré d'air et de plumes  
A présent ma peau est encore intacte  
Mais en moi elles sont entrées  
Elles saignent parfois, surtout la nuit...(p.106)

And again in August of that year, repeating the suggestion of insomnia:

Tout ce que j'ai écrit, et sans doute surtout le plus clair, le plus serein, n'a été que pour repousser l'inconnu; éloigner la peur qui à présent se rapproche; et, certaines nuits, triomphe. (p.114)

It is as if a pendulum were swinging back against him - or, to change the image, as if his counterweights no longer balanced the scales. The last pages of La Semaïson are contemporary not with the light poems of Airs but rather with a dark

85.(contd) comme si l'on ne pouvait plus parler, ne savait plus parler, ne savait plus parler. Il faut passer par là sous peine de mentir, de tricher".

86. Sem, p.102 (May 1966). Cf. NRF March 1965, p.489: "j'éprouve le besoin de sentir une détresse dans le chant

sequence about pain and death, written in a much more troubled style: Leçons.

These notebooks of 1963-67 appeared only in 1971, in the full volume of "carnets 1954-1967". This coincided with the publication of Poésie 1946-1967, thus inviting comparison between Jaccottet's prose and his verse. Pierre Chappuis said it was "comme si l'approche du poème comptait autant que le poème (...) puisqu'il s'agit toujours de saisir l'Insaisissable", and inclined towards the notebooks: "les pages de La Semaïson sont plus vraies parce que plus près de l'expérience immédiate".<sup>87</sup> In one sense this is a judgement on the failure of many poems to equal their higher pretensions. But it is also a positive commendation of the notebooks. In them Jaccottet's eye is sharper than ever, and his pen is finer. As another reviewer, J.-P. Amette, declared: "L'extrême musicalité de la phrase chez Jaccottet se fait plus tendue, plus ramassée, plus urgente..."<sup>88</sup>

To contrast La Semaïson with his other books, however, tends to miss the point, as if it stood in competition with them. These notebooks (like the later ones of Journées) have their own validity, while at the same time complementing and supporting the author's other work through exercises in language and in landscape: they are the sowing without which there could be no harvest.

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86.(contd) le plus savant et le plus pur, sans doute parce que je ne partage les certitudes de personne".

87. La Quinzaine littéraire, 1 Feb. 1972, pp.9-10, his emphasis. Note that Jaccottet is tempted to prefer, in Bonnefoy's work, the prose to the verse (L'Entretien des Muses, p.254).

88. In NRF, Feb. 1972, p.87.

The collection of prose-texts entitled Paysages avec figures absentes, first published in 1970, could be called a good harvest. Or we could say, changing the metaphor, that if La Semaïson offers sketchbooks, then this is a series of landscape paintings. Since the poetry it most relates to is that of Airs (1961-64) rather than that of A la lumière d'hiver (1966-76), it will be discussed in this chapter and not the next.

The first and longest of these prose-texts had already appeared in 1964, in conjunction with a series of engravings by Gérard de Palézieux, under the title Paysages de Grignan.<sup>89</sup> Though making no reference to Palézieux it complements very well the artist's devoted treatment of the region.<sup>90</sup> It also complements Airs, quoting in passing from one poem,<sup>91</sup> and proves that although none of the poems contained place-names they are, nevertheless, set predominantly in Grignan.<sup>92</sup>

It is to this text that Jaccottet gives the strange heading "Paysages avec figures absentes",<sup>93</sup> later applied to the collected edition as a whole. This is an antiphrastic allusion to the "paysages avec figures" of the Renaissance, when painters "avaient peuplé les lieux où ils vivaient de nymphes,

89. Lausanne, Bibliothèque des Arts, 1964.

90. Jaccottet does, however, discuss this Swiss artist (born 1919) in Ecriture 5, 1969, pp.83-87.

91. "Arbres II" (P/A, p.139), also first published in 1964 (Ecriture I, p.24). We can therefore suppose that this prose-text was written in the winter of 1963-64 - and indeed the phrase of Parménides quoted on Pay, p.29 was noted by Jaccottet in January 1964 (Sem, p.29).

92. I do not know why the Swiss writer V. Godel should assert that "outre les scintillances de la Drôme, l'univers privilégié - monastère aérien - du poète vaudois reflète (plus intensément peut-être) les trésors lumineux, subtils, infinis, du Léman..." (Le Thyrses, Nov.-Dec. 1967, p.51).

93. It is published as such in the NRF of July 1964, pp.1-16.

de temples en ruine, de satyres et de dieux".<sup>94</sup> Jaccottet's landscapes, by contrast, resemble more the paintings of Cézanne - which are not simply "sans figures", because "la grâce de l'Origine" remains strongly in evidence.<sup>95</sup> Jaccottet's main concern, indeed, is to explore his mental associations of this place with the notions of paradise and antiquity.

This forms his most important statement about the value he places on Grignan, at once fuller and deeper than the chapter in La Promenade (pp.47-52), which also had spoken of nymphs. The region has apparently nothing paradisiac about it,

rien qui évoque les "terres où coulent le lait et le miel", rien de particulièrement majestueux...<sup>96</sup>

But what matters to Jaccottet is that its understated, elusive beauty seems, particularly in winter, to be charged with poetic truth:

...à peine avais-je vu ces paysages, je les ai sentis m'attirer comme ce qui se dérobe (...) ma pensée, ma vue, ma rêverie, plus que mes pas, furent entraînées sans cesse vers quelque chose d'évasif, plutôt parole que lueur, et qui m'est apparu quelquefois analogue à la poésie même. (Pay, p.21)

94. Pay, p.32. Later he mentions Poussin (p.92) and Claude (pp.109-111). Ronsard's "Elégie" of 1584, from which he quotes on p.25, is an excellent poetic example to the same tendency.

95. Pay, p.33. The title seems to have baffled some critics: H. Juin says that "les paysages choisis, élus par Jaccottet sont par lui saisis dans l'absence de toutes figures qui viendraient en compromettre l'intensité" (Les Lettres nouvelles, 28 Oct. 1970, p.9). The TLS reviewer explained it best (Dec. 25, 1970, p.1514): "angels and dryads, though banished, continue to make their absence felt(...) something, of which they were local names, has been revealed to him". Clerval (p.21) misses the mark in speaking of "le refus obstiné que Philippe Jaccottet oppose aux 'figures'" - as if they are still needed to be banished; whereas in some ways he regrets their absence. Passages like Obs, pp.97-8, El, p.165, and Jou, p.36 take for granted that the divine is distant from our world.

96. Pay, p.23. Cf. Prom, p.19.

Sometimes it is not merely analogous to poetry. The "imémoriale haleine divine" from which poetry emanates<sup>97</sup> is present within these landscapes:

... dans l'intérieur de ces lieux était un souffle, ou un murmure, à la fois le plus ancien, le tout ancien, et le plus neuf, le plus frais... (Pay, pp.29-30)

The poems of Airs mostly tried to seize the freshness and immediateness of nature; this prose-text probes the ancientness of the landscape, its resemblances to the author's image of Greece. And here Jaccottet pursues his subject cautiously and indirectly, wary of the imagery he uses, and uncertain about the religious language he nevertheless keeps introducing, for example when evoking an evening sky:

Il faudrait parler plutôt d'un poudrolement de feu, d'une ouverture et aussi d'une ascension, d'une transfiguration, frôlant ainsi sans cesse des idées religieuses, quand les frôler seulement est déjà trop; car c'est cela, et c'est toujours autre chose encore? Car ce sont les choses qui sont telles, terre et ciel, nuées, sillons, broussailles, étoiles; ce sont les choses seules qui se transfigurent... (Pay, pp.18-19)

Could non-religious language ever convey his sense of the age-old and the ageless, of the numinous within the natural, or immanent transcendence? And yet religious terms distract and mislead. Jaccottet's usual practice is to exploit them for their resonance, and then to abandon them in his continued quest for "toujours autre chose encore".

The placing of this text at the head of the prose-collection of 1970 gives it especial significance. Viewed as the opening item in a series of over a dozen exhibits, it

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97. Pay, p.31. Cf. Sem, p.39: "Dieu est un souffle, on ne peut s'en emparer. La poésie est la parole que ce souffle alimente et porte...", and Sem, p.42: "Parole-passage, ouverture laissée au souffle. Aussi aimons-nous les vallées, les chemins, l'air. Ils nous donnent une indication sur le souffle" (March 1960).

announces the prime importance of landscape in the volume as a whole, and it introduces an inquiry into the ancient and persistent meanings which the visible world can have for human observers. We may contrast this with the opening chapters of La Promenade sous les arbres and Eléments d'un songe, to which Paysages is in many ways a sequel. Those books began with discussions of literature (of A.E. and of Musil) before moving into more creative material such as evocations of nature. This book is directed towards landscape from the start; and as a whole it is less less cerebral than they were, and more beautiful. It does contain a corresponding discussion of literature, in this case of Hölderlin - but that forms the penultimate chapter, and is fairly short (pp.139-155).

The arrangement of texts in Paysages is not chronological,<sup>98</sup> but seems designed rather to group the more poetic pieces together before the more reflective ones, to place nature before culture. Those in the former category resemble the "Exemples" of La Promenade, except that they are more accomplished. Their function in the book is to exemplify the claim of chapter one that the "absent figures" still make their existence felt, by describing places and moments when the numinous is perceived in the natural.

The most attractive of these is "Le Pré de mai": it must

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98. For example, the fourth last chapter, "Deux lumières", had appeared as early as July 1966 (in the NRF, pp.154-7, under the title "Peintures à Cologne"); and the third last one begins with a quotation from Sénancour noted in March 1966 (Sem, p.98). When Paysages was republished in 1976 Jaccottet included between chapters one and two a text entitled "Sur le seuil" written in 1971. This was developed from a note of October 1971 (Jou, p.43) and first appeared in Prospice, 3, 1975.

be counted as one of Jaccottet's finest prose-poems. The subject here, a meadow full of poppies, calls to mind a canvas of Monet<sup>99</sup> - and the poet's evocation of it could indeed be termed "impressionistic":

Rouge, rouge! Ce n'est pas du feu, encore moins  
du sang. C'est bien trop gai, trop léger pour cela.  
(Pay, p.77)

The sentences are short, often verbless. The beauty and simplicity of the scene is stated but not analysed, while the exclamatory tone conveys the poet's excitement. His imagery is suitably festive:

Comme un dimanche de cloches gaies dans la semaine  
des champs, comme quand les filles vont danser en  
bandes l'après-midi au village le plus proche. (Pay,  
p.79).

Jaccottet does not, however, lean heavily on that simile - it is merely one among several rapid glimpses of an ephemeral scene:

Ces choses, herbes et fleurs, ces coloris, cette  
foule, entr'aperçus par hasard, en passant, au milieu  
d'un plus vaste et vague ensemble,  
herbes et coquelicots croisant mes pas, ma vie,  
pré de mai dans mes yeux, fleurs dans un regard,  
rencontrant une pensée,  
éclats rouges, ou jaunes, ou bleus, se mêlant à des  
rêveries... (Pay, p.79)

These reveries are not explored, but we know that they harmonize with the colours seen, that a brief meeting has taken place, at once rare and perfectly common. What sets this text apart is its spontaneity, the way its language recreates the marvellous immediacy of the particular experience. Somehow

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99. That artist's concern, too, was the actual natural scenes, which he painted rapidly on the spot. Regarding this choice of subject, Clerval comments (p.26): "des coquelicots dans un pré portés par la houle légère sont décrits comme l'ornement de l'air, comme le lien ténu entre le sol et la brise qui assure la liaison, le passage insensible de la terre vers le ciel".



the scene evoked in its very transience acquires a mysterious significance. It succeeds in recreating lightly and poetically something central and paradoxical which another text explains in pretentious prose:

cette immédiateté qui est aussi la plus profonde  
profondeur, cette fragilité qui est la force durable,  
cette beauté qui ne doit pas être différente de la  
vérité. (Pay, p.70)

Experiences such as this are the subject of all the pieces that surround "Le Pré de mai".

One of the earlier ones, "Bois et blés",<sup>100</sup> recalls the author's heightened emotion, during one of his walks, at seeing a grove of ilexes and then a field of golden wheat. The colours of the earth in the light and shade of evening take on an unusual depth of reality:

Je cherche le chemin du centre, où tout s'apaise  
et s'arrête. Je crois que ces choses qui me touchent  
en sont plus proches. (Pay, pp.41-2)

The incident recorded in "La Tourterelle turque" - a bird taking flight at dawn - provokes a keener emotion: "le trouble, la joie d'une annonce à peine saisissable, ou l'entrebâillement de la porte du Temps" (Pay, p.47). The last page of this piece apostrophizes the "tourterelle turque" in lyrical prose.

That bird fascinated Jaccottet for its appearance, for the gentle languidness of its plumage; the numerous ones in "Oiseaux invisibles" amaze him by floating high in the air. He perceived only their singing, but "rien que d'avoir entendu cela, mon attention s'était portée à nouveau, par surprise, par grâce, vers ce qui, plus pur, la purifie et plus lumineux, l'illumine" (Pay, p.72). It is hardly surprising, then, that

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100. First published in Ecriture 3, 1967, pp.47-50.

Jaccottet should write poetically about these birds; they satisfy in a striking way his fondness for images of weightlessness and transience, they stimulate his "rêve aérien" by being (apparently) absorbed into the light of the open sky.

"Prose au serpent" concerns a scene of sand and pinetrees which gives the author a sense of harmony and eternity. It is deserted, except for a snake which prompts him to imagine the presence of a beautiful woman and to recall the Earthly Paradise of Genesis. Onto this image of bliss, however, is superimposed its opposite, since the biblical myth (which of course relates Man's expulsion from Eden and subjection to death) seems to figure "la limite de la compréhension" (Pay, p.90), that obstacle which human existence must come to terms with. Nevertheless, Jaccottet finds it good to maintain the dream of eternity, to seize "tout élan vers le Jardin" (Pay, p.91) in whatever transient form it may come - such as the calm elemental landscape he has described.

The piece entitled "Soir"<sup>101</sup> and its companion "Même lieu, autre moment" present a country scene on a summer evening and then an autumn afternoon. The contrast is considerable, in colours and in mood, between the tranquillity of the immemorial sheep in "Soir" and the shimmering light of its sequel; yet each of these modest pieces has a strong feeling of beauty and of life.

Perhaps the least satisfying of the chapters in Paysages is "Travaux au lieu dit l'Etang". But it is also, in many ways, the most revealing. Its peculiarity is that it lacks the apparent "polish" of the others (though I doubt that the author actually spent a long time revising, say, "Le Pré de

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101. First published in the NRF, Oct. 1967, pp.636-8.

mai"), that it shows Jaccottet laboriously probing with language and failing to find words to match his feelings. A certain struggle with language can be found in the other texts; "Oiseaux invisibles", for example, contains this passage:

Or, ce n'est pas du tout cela. L'image cache le réel, distrait le regard, et quelquefois d'autant plus qu'elle est plus précise, plus séduisante pour l'un ou l'autre de nos sens et pour la rêverie.<sup>102</sup>

But there the tension built up is followed by release, later in the text. "Travaux au lieu dit l'Etang", however, hardly seems to get anywhere. It contains several fragments of poetry, all attempts to capture the one experience.

Jaccottet's decision to publish these side by side, rather than selecting the best alone, betrays the influence of Ponge's "textes de recherche", with their repetitions and reprises.<sup>103</sup>

All of these drafts start from an observation noted in

November 1966:

Merveille de voir, dans ce pays sec, des rides soudain dans l'eau d'un champ, et même, contre les roseaux de la "rive" opposée, une aile d'écume, presque imperceptible. (Sem, p.122)

As Jaccottet tries to understand his wonderment and to convey it better he allows the reader to watch his mind at work.

102. Pay, p.68. This passage continues the reflection on imagery begun in the latter part of La Promenade. Even "Le Pré de mai" is not exempt from such considerations: "Toutes ces 'trouvailles' le trahissent, le dénaturent" (Pay, p.78). P. Chappuis in his review speaks of this "crainte constante d'en dire trop, de n'avoir pas trouvé le mot, dénis non seulement scrupuleux, mais inhérents au propos" (La Quinzaine littéraire, 1-15 Dec. 1970, p.9).

103. Jaccottet admits this in the NRF, March 1976, p.66, where he repeats the words of Prom, p.128: "l'acharnement ne me réussit pas". He had previously published successive drafts of the same poem in El, pp.183-4 and in Sem, pp.34-5 (notes of March 1960).

For a time he lets his imagination wander, then he restrains it with a more sober voice:

Je sais bien que la vue de l'eau nous touche par  
une suggestion quasi machinale de fraîcheur, de  
pureté, qu'elle nous désaltère tout l'être" (Pay, p.56)

We see him trying out metaphors, discarding them, and later looking for new ones; drafting poems of the kind found in Airs, sometimes like brief haiku, sometimes tinged with preciousness.<sup>104</sup> And throughout, the line of his self-criticisms is to reject the aesthetically pleasing formulation in the name of truth: "La 'vérité' semblait pourtant si simple...".<sup>105</sup> Towards the end he admits to a feeling of frustration, of incapacity. But at the same time the very elusiveness of the experience assures him that it is important.

Perhaps this whole chapter would have been omitted had not the last two pages achieved some measure of confidence and fervour. In them the poet suggests that he had been in contact, for a moment, with the outer limits of human vision, with a frontier where the earth seemed to say "Entre" and "Passe". His sudden leap into metaphysics here is less convincing than the subtle transitions between description and reflection found in other texts. It does, however, remind us that he had not entirely lost his former dream of death as passage:

Ce ne peut être qu'un dieu qui m'invite à cette  
porte de paille

Je m'agenouille dans l'herbe pleine d'air

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104. This adds, incidentally, to the evidence that the poems of Airs were written in response to particular natural sights.

105. Pay, p.58. Cf. p.48: C'est le tout à fait simple qui est impossible à dire". One might call Jaccottet a perfectionist but for this insistence that perfection is unattainable.

Si je me couchais maintenant dans la terre, je  
volerais.<sup>106</sup>

The brief text included in the 1976 edition, "Sur le seuil", is a fitting addition to Paysages avec figures absentes. Like the other poetic pieces, it evokes a specific time and place in such a way as to convey a sense of "l'illimité". The incident is simply this: the author, walking in a pine-forest in spring, is present at the moment when water starts dripping through a hole in an old wall. He describes the setting carefully and objectively, and attempts to characterize the noise - "une sorte de carillon infime et décidé". Then he explores the sense of wonderment it gave him: "on dirait des paroles d'un autre monde". The stone wall at which he stands, "comme un pèlerin écoutant matines, mais sonner dans un espace inconnu, pour un dieu encore sans nom", seems thus to form a threshold between our world and "le lointain qui déchire, qui appelle".<sup>107</sup>

This proves to be a particularly pure realization of certain ideas that had been present in the opening chapter. Although Jaccottet does not explicitly mention nymphs or poetry, the phenomenon perceived certainly suggests "quelque chose d'évasif, plutôt parole que lueur (...) analogue à la poésie même" (Pay, p.21).. It is indeed "un murmure, à la fois

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106. Pay, p.64. Cf. P/I, p.71: "j'allais entrer dans l'herbe sans aucune peur". The reviewer who most commends this chapter, calling it "un texte exemplaire", praises not its poetry but its rigorous method: "Le poète doit constamment déjouer les pièges de la rêverie, de la perfection formelle, d'une certaine culture qui substitue des références à l'impression, pour travailler dans le sens même de la 'chose' vue" (P.-A. Tâche in La Revue des Belles Lettres, 3/4, 1971, p.76).

107. Paysages, 1976 edition, p.40. Cf. P/A, p.120: "distance, longue étincelle/ qui déchire, qui affine".

le plus ancien, le tout ancien, et le plus neuf, le plus frais; déchirant de fraîcheur, déchirant de vieillesse".<sup>108</sup>

The paradoxical, superlative nature of that phrase, however, calls for a corrective note. Discussion of Jaccottet's poetic prose tends to gravitate towards the reflective passages, which are the more quotable parts - and indeed a certain metaphysical aspiration is central to these texts - but as a result justice is not done to their evocation of landscape, to the reality of a natural seen in various times and seasons. The review of Paysages that best counters this emphasis is by an English critic, who wrote that Jaccottet "renders the spirit of place through the unemphatic intensity of his prose, in scenes both convincingly and ambiguously mysterious and also richly natural. He is constantly making us see landscape anew".<sup>109</sup>

The last four chapters of Paysages are reflections not on natural but on cultural phenomena. The first work of art discussed serves as a point of transition: it is a landscape painting, by Claude Lorrain, which attracted Jaccottet by its light and space. The unusual sense of serenity and youth it gave him was enhanced by the classical subject, Eros and Psyche (this is, after all, "un paysage avec figures"). The author contrasts it with a very different painting which happens to hang in the same gallery and to date from the same period:<sup>110</sup>

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108. Pay, pp.29-30. Its ending echoes this and another passage: "c'est toujours autre chose encore" (Pay, p.18).

109. In The Times Literary Supplement, Dec. 25, 1970, p.1514. Unsigned.

110. 1666 is the date given by W. Friedländer in his Claude Lorrain - he calls this landscape "Amor rettet Psyche". Jaccottet's treatment of it is discussed by Clerval (p.48). As for the portrait, A. Bredius in his Rembrandt entitles it "A Scholar at his desk" and dates it 1645.

a dark and majestic portrait by Rembrandt. He looked at these two, he says, "comme on regarde le matin et le soir"; and indeed the light in the Rembrandt emanating palely from the face and the book, seems a suitably grave image for those times when it seems that "toute clarté devienne odieux mensonge" (Pay, pp.113-4). This chapter is not art-criticism in the strict sense then: it views the paintings in an emotional way, in terms of the author's personal quest for hope. For him, "l'art est toujours autre chose que l'art".<sup>111</sup> By weighing the luminosity of Claude against the chiaroscuro of Rembrandt, it throws into relief the dialectical nature of his thinking, justifying H. Juin's comment on the book in general: "les émerveillements de Jaccottet sont doublés d'inquiétude".<sup>112</sup>

The creative artist most discussed in this latter part of Paysages is a German poet. As another reviewer put it: "L'ombre d'Hölderlin est plus d'une fois présente, agissante dans le livre. Non pas comme guide ou comme modèle. Plutôt comme aliment de l'inquiétude".<sup>113</sup> Jaccottet had been interested in Hölderlin since before 1950, as we saw at the end of chapter three. The essay devoted to him in Paysages keeps belatedly the promise made in La Promenade: "il faudra que je revienne un jour sur les quelques images que ce poète incomparable m'a laissées".<sup>114</sup> This is not so much a piece of

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111. In NRF, Oct. 1974, p.139.

112. In Lettres françaises, 28 Oct. 1970, p.9.

113. A. Dalmas in Le Monde, 12 Sept. 1970, p.1.

114. Prom, p.17. In fact Jaccottet has discussed Hölderlin many times in the pages of the NRF, notably in February 1967 (which reproduces his preface to the Pléiade edition), but also in Oct. 1958, in Jan. 1959, July 1961, April 1965, and July 1974; and also in the "Poésie/Gallimard" edition of Hypérion (1973).

criticism or biography (as is the Rilke par lui-même) as Jaccottet's own interrogation of a poet and his works, of what he calls elsewhere Hölderlin's "destinée sombre et éblouissante à la fois" (El, p.148). It summarizes quickly that poet's views on the Greek gods and on Christ as the last of them, before concentrating on the latter part of his career, after the period of the long hymns, after his return from Bordeaux in 1802.<sup>115</sup> These are the years immediately preceding madness, when "Hölderlin marche vers le feu, le feu désiré et redouté" (Pay, p.149), when a great spiritual tension found expression in fragmentary images; and the serenity that followed, in which "il nous semble véritablement voir s'éteindre l'esprit d'Icare" (Pay, p.155). The Hölderlin that emerges from this picture is not a myth-maker but a poet of reality, for whom at times "les choses, les apparences (...) prennent l'intensité d'une vision".<sup>116</sup> It is here, above all, that we see the relevance of Hölderlin to Jaccottet's work, although it is not made very explicit:<sup>117</sup> he found something holy in the visible world around him, but wrote, as it were, "avec dieux absents", in the belief that "le poète ne peut

115. Jaccottet repeatedly states his predilection for poems written after this date (e.g. Prom, p.123, NRF, Feb. 1967, pp.230-1, L'Entretien des Muses, pp.138, 271, and Gustave Roud, p.81).

116. Pay, p.147. Cf. NRF, Jan. 1959, p.102: "Ce qui est particulièrement admirable en effet chez Hölderlin, et ce qui sans doute nous le rend proche aujourd'hui, c'est que la méditation, loin de l'entraîner hors du monde, s'appuie sur une vision de plus en plus aiguë de celui-ci". On Pay, p.149 a fragment of Hölderlin is likened to haiku poetry.

117. The chapter on Musil in Eléments was much more explicit. One reviewer called this piece on Hölderlin "perfectly relevant but unoriginal" (The Times Literary Supplement, Dec. 25, 1970, p.1514, unsigned).



que veiller sur leurs traces", and that he may even have to "oublier même ces traces, pour une plus vraie fidélité".<sup>118</sup>

Hölderlin's career ended in pudeur, says Jaccottet, in a kind of renunciation, the ultimate extent of which is shown in the lines quoted by Jaccottet in the title to this chapter:

So sehr einfältig aber die Bilder, so sehr  
Heilig sind die, dass man wirklich  
Oft fürchtet, die zu beschreiben.<sup>119</sup>

Jaccottet's discussion of Hölderlin shows particularly well his belief stated in the preceding chapter that "les oeuvres ne nous éloignent pas de la vie, elles nous y ramènent, nous aident à vivre mieux..." (Pay, p.125). This principle is applied, in the latter part of Paysages, to cultural material of various kinds, both works of art and extracts from literature. There are references, more or less brief, to painting ancient and modern, to writers of the distant and recent past, and to ruined tombs and temples seen in their present circumstances. Jaccottet's notes on these diverse subjects are often reminiscent of La Semaïson, from which some of them were certainly derived.<sup>120</sup> It might have been better, actually,

118. Pay, p.146. Cf. Jaccottet's speech in the 1971 Bulletin de la Fondation C.F. Ramuz, p.20: "Il a laissé entendre, si je le comprends bien, qu'aujourd'hui, l'homme et le dieu (...) ne pouvait plus se rencontrer que s'ils se détournent l'un de l'autre (...) Peut-être qu'il faut que nous nous oublions totalement, nous et notre soif de l'Etre, nous et notre besoin de la poésie".

119. This is part of a semi-authentic poem taken from Waiblinger's Phaeton. In English: "But these images (which I see) are so very simple, so very holy, that often one is really afraid to describe them..." Jaccottet finds something similar in Rilke's last poems: "il n'y a plus que les éléments, les signes du sensible, le réseau léger de leurs rapports" (Rilke par lui-même, p.171). Cf. Jou, p.25.

120. Pages 177-9 and 122-5 quote from Sem, pp.98 (March 1966), 116 (Oct. 1966) and 104-5 (May 1966), which suggests that this section of Paysages was written well before its first appearance (in NRF, March 1970). Pages 162-3, however, echo Jou, p.21 (Oct. 1969).

if more material had remained in notebook form, since their fragmentary nature tends to disperse the lines of thought of Paysages. While Jaccottet very carefully integrates the passage from S  nancour (Pay, p.117) into his book, he makes only casual remarks on the quotations from Rilke, Kassner and Simone Weil (Pay, pp.160-2, 165-7, 169-70) - lengthy quotations which raise a multiplicity of issues.<sup>121</sup> The material included here is rich; but the presentation is a long way from Jaccottet's usual clarity. The best piece of commentary here deals in fact with the author's own notebook-poem "Au moment o   le soir...",<sup>122</sup> a haiku-like piece recording "la convergence,    demi confuse, de plusieurs sensations..." - it is the sort of discreet commentary that would suit the poems of Airs, if they needed it.

Jaccottet's discussions of painting and architecture are likewise uneven. He does not, for example, explore Kassner's remarks about Van Gogh and C  zanne. And the recollections of his early travels in Italy, though striking, are less successful than the pages that precede them, which evoke Saint-Blaise, a ruined town 40km west of Marseille. Here the author's reaction to the landscape as a whole overwhelms questions of history and archaeology, thus emphasizing the difference in vision between poets and scientists.<sup>123</sup> The

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121. Rather than describing the Rilke piece as "un curieux m  lange de vrai et de faux", for example (Pay, p.162), Jaccottet might have shown how Rilke misunderstood the Christian view of earthly and physical things. And he should certainly have told the reader clearly the identity of "cet autre   crivain" in the Kassner passage (Pay, p.165).

122. Pay, p.116, first noted in October 1966 (Sem, p.116). This date places it closer to Airs, and to Jaccottet's reading of Blyth's Haiku, which gives model commentaries.

123. Pay, p.129. Another note on this difference, in Journ  es (p.11, Sept. 1968) speaks of "la recherche d'un totalit   qui inclue le temps, la vie, le particulier, le sujet-

result is at once a poetic piece similar to those earlier in Paysages and a demonstration of "la façon dont de tels lieux me parlent" (Pay, p.126).

Jaccottet attempts also, as he did near the end of Eléments,<sup>124</sup> to draw together his thoughts about religion. In this he is particularly diffident, admitting that "mon savoir manque d'étendue, ma pensée de fermeté" (Pay, p.159), and thus anticipating the critic who wrote:

Jaccottet theorizes discursively about the "faith" which he has so far simply enacted in moments of poetic insight... The weakness lies not, of course, in the inability to achieve objective assurance, but in the poorer quality of the thinking at this point, its sudden laxity.<sup>125</sup>

This section treats discontinuously, sometimes dialectically, various aspects of the pagan and Christian world-views, opposing images of physical beauty (from Titian, and the Villa dei Misteri at Pompeii) to that of Christ, "cadavre bafoué, torturé".<sup>126</sup> The author explains the attraction of "un dieu livré à la souffrance et à la mort", and admits his own need to dream and to hope - "si l'on me traitait de sceptique, j'aurais le sentiment que le mot est faux" (Pay, p.168) - but at the same time he repeats his resistance to dogma of whatever kind. It is only in the last few pages that we encounter something like a credal statement:

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123.(contd) tif...".

124. El, pp.163-74. There is also, on Pay, p.175, an allusion to the end of La Promenade (p.131).

125. In The Times Literary Supplement, Dec. 25, 1970, p.1514. Unsigned. We can relate this to Jaccottet's general difficulty in writing conclusions, seen in Eléments, La Promenade, and L'Obscurité.

126. Pay, p.163. This contrast was implicit in the chapter about Claude and Rembrandt, and explicit in this note of May 1966: "je me découvre entre les jeunes dieux grecs et le dieu crucifié, entre les dieux de la jeunesse et les dieux qui devaient venir quand l'humanité se sentirait vieille et malade" (Sem, p.102).

En fait, de toutes mes incertitudes, la moindre (la moins éloignée d'un commencement de foi) est celle que m'a donnée l'expérience poétique; c'est la pensée qu'il y a de l'inconnu, de l'insaisissable, à la source, au foyer même de notre être. (Pay, p.173)

With that goes a summary of the various forms in which light can touch us", par éclaircies, lueurs éparses et combattues, rares éclairs, et non continûment comme on le rêve..." (Pay, p.174). Here he mentions not just natural sights and works of art, but also the radiance that ordinary human life sometimes possesses.<sup>127</sup>

When we consider Paysages avec figures absentes as a whole, its weaknesses seem unimportant beside the successes which make it the author's finest prose-work so far. It does not have the youthful fervour of La Promenade or the agitated questioning of Eléments, but it achieves a greater unity and purity than those books. While Jaccottet's thought is less confident than ever, his sense of beauty is perhaps more assured, his eye more acute, and his style more subtle. The opening text displays all of these virtues, along with an unaccustomed serenity; while the simpler poetic pieces, such as "Bois et blés", "Oiseaux invisibles" and "Le Pré de mai" are particularly satisfying and memorable.

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127. It is a pity that Jaccottet discusses this human aspect so rarely. One reviewer (J.-P. Martinet in Matulu, March 1971, p.4) found particular beauty in the passage beginning "la patience, le courage d'hommes effacés..." (Pay, pp.174-5).

## GRIEF AND PERSISTENCE

In turning to Jaccottet's work of the late 1960's, we must give attention to critical writings. He had begun to review books in the 1940's, as we saw in chapter two; and has done so ever since, as a source of additional income, and as part of his ongoing commitment to modern literature. His most important discussions of other writers in the 1950's, however, were not reviews but essays included in his creative works: the chapters about A.E. and Musil which we have already examined. We have noted also that La Semaïson makes frequent references to past writers: these tend to favour non-French authors, and they become more numerous in the 1960's.

In 1966 Jaccottet seems to have reduced his translating work to devote more time to criticism. Much of L'Entretien des Muses was written in 1966-67, though some parts date back to 1955. This volume was published in 1968, along with the monograph Gustave Roud. Jaccottet's Rilke par lui-même appeared in 1970, as did Paysages avec figures absentes, which contains his most personal essay on Hölderlin.<sup>1</sup> Mention should be made also of the travel-book Autriche, important only for its presentations of Austrian writers past and present. Having, he says, "abordé l'Autriche à travers Musil qui n'est pas tendre pour elle",<sup>2</sup> Jaccottet has occasion to

1. Pay, pp.139-155. This essay (which has been discussed above) quotes from Jaccottet's Pléiade edition of Hölderlin's Oeuvres, published in 1967. His preface to this edition appeared also in NRF, Feb. 1967.

2. Autriche, Lausanne 1966, p.113.

discuss also Stifter, Rilke, Kassner, Trakl, Bachmann, Celan and others.

The weightiest of these critical works is L'Entretien des Muses. It is a book designated in two ways: the title-page says "chroniques de poésie", since most of the texts had appeared earlier in the Nouvelle Revue Française or the Gazette de Lausanne; but the front cover says "essai", implying that the collection has an intrinsic unity. The contents are indeed diverse - brief and not so brief notes or essays on thirty French poets of the twentieth century, including well-known figures from Claudel and Jouve to Eluard and Guillevic, obscure ones like Lubin and Delisle, Swiss writers such as Crisinel and Chappaz, and poets younger than Jaccottet himself (Pierre Oster, last in the chronological line-up, was born in 1933). Thus it was in 1968 one of the most wide-ranging books on modern French poetry. Yet the author's preface is a disclaimer: "ce livre ne prétend en aucune façon dresser un panorama de ce demi-siècle de poésie".<sup>3</sup> His concluding "Remarques", however, concentrate on the resemblances he sees between the poets, on the common achievements of dissimilar writers. The book is certainly no random assemblage of occasional reviews: the texts included are a small fraction of Jaccottet's criticism, and in giving them more permanent form he has often appended extra notes to remedy possible gaps or imbalances. As one reviewer said: "de tels

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3. L'Entretien des Muses, p.7. That is a little over-stated: the book is a personal survey of recent poets, mostly living ones. Some omissions may be accidental, like the failure to mention Desnos or Frénaud; but Jaccottet could in 1966-67 have written a few pages on Fargue or Queneau (as he did for Breton and Follain), and he deliberately excluded an article on Aragon that had appeared in the NRF of August 1959.

articles vieillissent. Jaccottet en a tenu compte en composant son recueil, en révisant ses textes, en les complétant (...). Ce qui le justifie est le besoin de défendre une conception de la poésie".<sup>4</sup>

The name of the book announces its idiosyncratic nature - "titre un peu désuet", noted R.-M. Albérès, "ces Muses nous font un peu sourire".<sup>5</sup> Jaccottet's sole explanation, "emprunté à une pièce de clavecin de Rameau" (p.8), leaves a few questions unanswered. Rameau had used the word "entretien" to mean "conversation", alluding to the subtle three-part counterpoint in the piece. Its style is more gracious, more tender, more intimate than is usual for this composer: along with "Les Soupirs",<sup>6</sup> it owes a large debt to Couperin and to Couperin's declared preference - "j'ayme mieux ce qui me touche que ce qui me surprend". We may contrast this aesthetic with the assertion: "La surprise est le grand ressort moderne" of Apollinaire, to whom Jaccottet never once refers. His choice of title is thus not unlike the much more provocative remarks of Ponge in honour of Malherbe (or of Rameau): a bow to the past, to a refined tradition of the ancien régime. The best proof of Jaccottet's intention is a review of 1959 where he quotes a line from Vents of Saint-John Perse, "Et si l'homme de talent préfère la roseraie et le jeu du clavecin, il sera dévoré par les chiens..." and comments:

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4. R. Lacôte in Lettres françaises, 8 May 1968, p.12.
  5. In Les Nouvelles littéraires, 8 Aug. 1968, p.5. Jaccottet himself had noted in 1961 that: "Plus personne aujourd'hui, de peur d'être ridiculisé, n'ose parler d'inspiration ou de muse" (Prom, p.148).
  6. This piece also dates from 1724 - on page 144 Jaccottet refers to it and to Couperin's "Barricades mystérieuses", which he cites also in La Semaïson (p.109, June 1966) as an example of "la mesure fertile".

en faveur du clavecin il y aurait aussi des arguments à prononcer, et sinon du clavecin, de toute oeuvre mesurée, inapparente, retenue. Les bruits d'aujourd'hui, de toute façon, dominent: savoir si le presque-silence ne s'y oppose pas mieux que les orgues?<sup>7</sup>

L'Entretien des Muses is indeed full of opinions. While accepting a plurality of muses - "il n'y a jamais eu pour la poésie une seule voie" (p.288) - Jaccottet considers that the truest, purest poetry is discreet, restrained, and simple in expression. And so he writes more warmly of understated verse, like that of Henri Thomas, "la poésie la plus limpide dans les limites d'un langage presque neutre" (p.216), than of ostentatious poetry - he finds that of Saint-John Perse, for example, to be overconfident. Behind this preference lie Jaccottet's views on the situation of the "poète moderne, presque toujours en deuil du sacré" (p.54), views he had expounded in La Promenade.<sup>8</sup> Poets today, he thinks, are naturally lacking in ideological convictions, inevitably full of doubts, because the modern world separates them from primitive reality. Thus the eloquence of Perse (or of Aragon) offends Jaccottet's sense of truth. Pierre Chappuis makes this comment: "les oeuvres les mieux goûtées sont celles d'où toute emphase est bannie (...), l'exaltation ne supporte pas la durée, la vraie poésie ne se soutient que fragmentairement".<sup>9</sup> Of course not all readers will agree with Jaccottet's position, and some may find in his critical opinions an indirect apology for the sort of poetry he writes - but this is not altogether a

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7. In NRF, Aug. 1959, p.304. We may note also Jaccottet's enthusiastic remarks about French harpsichord music in "Les Cormorans" (NRF, Oct. 1974).

8. Prom, pp.105-109. That passage, prompted by a page of Hölderlin, is echoed in L'Entretien des Muses, p.305.

9. In NRF, Sept. 1968, p.327.



bad thing: there is a place for the avowedly subjective views of one whose personal involvement gives feeling to his criticisms. In stating his reservations about Perse (or for that matter Char), Jaccottet takes care not to be excessively scathing or dogmatic or prescriptive.<sup>10</sup> His rigour has been commended by Starobinski: "Jaccottet sait dire, à l'occasion, avec tact et fermeté, ce qui l'empêche d'entrer pleinement dans une oeuvre. N'étant pas indifférent à la beauté, il a le courage de marquer des différences, des préférences, bref, de juger".<sup>11</sup> His praise for works close to his ideal is all the keener for this. And he never commits the error of pretending that his judgements are objective and indisputable.

The chief recurrent theme in the diversity of L'Entretien des Muses is perhaps that of the poet's treatment of reality, the importance and also the difficulty of a true and innocent vision of ordinary things. Jaccottet finds this to be a common preoccupation of many of the writers discussed. They display, according to his concluding "Remarques", a great fascination du primitif, du brut, de l'élémentaire"; they have manifestly "le souci d'opposer à la fragile prolifération des idées la relative solidité, la constance, l'immobilité des choses élémentaires" (p.302). And their achievement is best seen not in their mastery of form but in the density of matter they attain: "Jamais la poésie n'avait accueilli dans la parole une ampleur, une diversité, une intensité, une prof-

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10. A review not included, however, treats Tzara patronizingly and disparages recent work of both Aragon and Cocteau (NRF, Sept. 1961). Jaccottet's criticism has tended to grow less trenchant, less arrogant over the years, but his views have become more fixed.

11. Preface to Jaccottet's Poésie 1946-67, p.15.

ondeur pareille de réalité" (p.300). On the other hand, the concreteness of poetry can easily be marred by obtrusive features of style, or by intellectual preoccupations (as he says, for example, to his friend Jean Tortel on page 172): such things prevent it from being transparent to the presence of the real world.

In this discussion of realism Jaccottet is able to include poets as different as Claudel and Ponge, as Tardieu and Deguy. Since the manifestations of modern poetry are so divergent, his identification of this common ground is all the more valuable. Furthermore, Jaccottet uses it as evidence that poetry is important:

Qui voudrait se convaincre que la poésie n'est ni cet enjolivement du réel, ni cette évasion hors du monde avec quoi on veut trop souvent la confondre, n'aurait qu'à ouvrir l'un ou l'autre de ces livres pour constater (...) qu'en fait, le regard des poètes modernes est l'un des plus attentifs et des plus aigus qui soient (...) pour nous qui vivons de plus en plus entourés de masques et de schémas intellectuels, et qui étouffons dans la prison qu'ils élèvent autour de nous, le regard du poète est le bélier qui renverse ces murs est nous rend, ne serait-ce qu'un instant, le réel; et, avec le réel, une chance de vie (p.301).

This argument is at least a small contribution towards an overview of modern poetry in French; and it certainly gives a unifying thread to L'Entretien des Muses. It is at the same time closely related to Jaccottet's personal concerns as the author of Airs and La Semaïson, preoccupied with the messages of the visible world, and using his reading of poetry as a sounding-board for his own questionings. Nowhere is this more apparent than in these words:

On comprend mieux maintenant de quelle sorte de réalisme il s'agit dans la poésie moderne: non pas simplement d'un minutieux inventaire du visible, mais d'une attention si profonde au visible qu'elle finit nécessairement par se heurter à ses limites; à l'illimité que le visible semble tantôt contenir, tantôt cacher, refuser ou

révéler. (p.304)

The Jaccottet we discover in L'Entretien des Muses is very much the same quester and interrogator we meet in his creative works. When he reads he reads for enjoyment and encounter, for nourishment, ultimately for illumination. He is revealed here as a "connaisseur de poésie",<sup>12</sup> endowed with unusual sensitivity and receptivity, what René Lacôte termed "une merveilleuse disposition à reconnaître l'accent d'un poète".<sup>13</sup> This is most apparent with writers for whom he has a close affinity - he approaches the inner mysteries of Supervielle or Bonnefoy with deceptive ease. But it is also true of a less likely case: Henri Michaux. Jaccottet's "Commentaire de L'Espace aux ombres" (pp.105-112) may be a less rigorous commentary than the scientific articles in the Cahiers de l'Herne of which he complains on page 307, but its insight alone gives it greater seriousness and import.

Besides, Jaccottet writes well. Without echoing the silly superlatives of one reviewer: "ce livre sur la poésie moderne est lui aussi pure poésie",<sup>14</sup> we can note that Jaccottet observes his stated principle of avoiding critical language incompatible with the poetry it discusses.<sup>15</sup> He does not hesitate to react intuitively to intuitive material. He

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12. "Un de nos meilleurs", wrote R.-M. Albérès in Les Nouvelles littéraires (8 Aug. 1968, p.5). J.-P. Richard dared to go further and call him "notre meilleur critique actuel de poésie" (Onze études sur la poésie moderne, p.275).

13. In Lettres françaises, 8 May 1968, p.12.

14. J.-P. Martinet in Matulu, March 1971, p.4.

15. See for example Sem, p.139 (Oct. 1967) or Gustave Roud, p.71: "si soucieux que j'aie toujours été de ne pas aborder la poésie dans un langage qui lui est mortel". Cf Pay, p.169: "Le langage le plus sobre est celui qui a le plus de chances de rendre compte des oeuvres comme il sied".

prefers metaphors to jargon, and discontinuities to clumsy linking paragraphs. And he seldom shows off his vast knowledge of literature.<sup>16</sup> In short, he writes to be read by readers of poetry.

Jaccottet's monographs on Roud and Rilke represent a different kind of criticism - descriptive introductions to all the writings of a single poet. Whereas the articles in L'Entretien des Muses conveyed relatively little information about the poets, these monographs offer an extensive and unhurried initiation into both author and works. Here Jaccottet is never contentious: he is the patient mediator of another man's thought, we might say self-effacing were not his commitment to these two poets such a deeply personal one. The attentiveness of his reading is even more impressive here than in L'Entretien des Muses. As Starobinski puts it:

Ce qui rend si attachants les livres que Jaccottet a consacrés à Gustave Roud, ou à Rilke, c'est qu'ils nous conduisent, au fil d'un discours où le timbre personnel est toujours présent, vers des moments d'écoute absolue, où le poème admiré - éclairé, célébré par le commentaire - respire et respendit de sa vie propre.<sup>17</sup>

Gustave Roud is an unpretentious presentation of an unassuming 70-year-old writer whom Jaccottet knew intimately. It discusses Roud's Swiss milieu, his poetic vision, his artistry, and his choice of a modest, solitary life of watchfulness. By emphasizing the integrity and constancy of Roud's

16. The writer most often referred to, apart from those under discussion, is not Rimbaud (7 mentions) or Baudelaire (12 mentions) but Hölderlin (15 mentions). To give a foreigner such importance in a book on French poetry is most unusual. A more recent case is Jaccottet's "Quelques notes à partir de Baudelaire" (NRF, June 1977, pp.64-72), which jumps quickly to Hölderlin, and then to Leopardi and to Petrarch.

17. Preface to Jaccottet, Poésie 1946-67, p.16. Cf. Clerval, p.48.

poetic preoccupations, it portrays him as an exemplary figure in a world that does not share his values. Many readers would agree with René Lacôte that "Jaccottet lui attribue une importance qui est peut-être d'ailleurs un peu excessive".<sup>18</sup> But that is no cause for surprise: Jaccottet announced in the opening pages that he stands personally in debt to Roud, and that he wishes to draw the attention of French readers to the literary achievements of la Suisse romande. But few would deny that he justifies Roud's inclusion in the "Poètes d'aujourd'hui" series. And not least of the book's virtues is the "choix de textes" required by Seghers: eighty pages of Roud's best prose-poetry, none of which was readily available in France at that time.

Jaccottet's Rilke par lui-même belongs, of course, to the well-known series from the Editions du Seuil, and it meets the highest standards of that collection in both its text and its illustrations. Though addressed to a general public, it is the most scholarly of Jaccottet's writings, giving much attention to the works of art that inspired Rilke, and recreating the poet's life and times better than we would expect from someone who had declared: "Aucun goût ne fut jamais en moi pour l'histoire, littéraire ou autre".<sup>19</sup> Jaccottet shows a meticulous knowledge of Rilke, and uses this knowledge with careful judgement. He presents Rilke not as a philosopher (or a philanderer<sup>20</sup>), but above all as an artist,

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18. In Lettres françaises, 7 Jan. 1970, p.8.

19. Prom, p.48. Jaccottet's scholarship does not seem heavily reliant on German biographers and commentators: his sources are Rilke's published books and letters.

20. Jaccottet could here attract the accusation later levelled at his edition of Rilke's Correspondance, that of showing a great "pudeur des secrets de l'homme Rilke" (J. Nobécourt in Le Monde, 5 Nov. 1976). He actually doubts that these

one able to interrogate the places he saw and the events he experienced, to reflect on their deepest meanings, and to transmute them - sometimes after long, tenacious waiting - into poetry of the highest order. To emphasize this literary achievement (and to accord with the principles of the "par lui-même" series) Jaccottet gives pride of place to quotations from Rilke's poetry and prose. These are among the book's greatest merits, and display very well the power and delicacy of Jaccottet the translator.

Jaccottet the poet was not very productive in the years that followed Airs (1961-64). His next two works, Leçons (written in 1966-67) and Chants d'en bas (written in 1973), are both short ones. And they are sombre: "Ce sont deux livres de deuil".<sup>21</sup>

The first of the two concerns the illness and death of a respected older man, whom it calls "l'aîné" or "le maître". These vague terms accord with Jaccottet's policy (since L'Effraie) of avoiding trivial personal references in his poetry. He has revealed elsewhere that this man was his father-in-law, named Haesler, who died of cancer.<sup>22</sup> But the reflections of

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20. (contd) secrets are revealing ones: "Je pense néanmoins que Rilke, par nature, était plutôt fait pour l'amour séraphique" (Pay, p.162).

21. Note on p.99 of A la lumière d'hiver (1977), in which they are republished.

22. Haesler was a printer, as is better explained in the revised text of P/L, p.159, which becomes: "Qu'il mesure, / comme il l'a fait jadis le plomb..." (Lum, p.9). He was perhaps one of the exemplary "hommes de métier" mentioned in A travers un verger (p.42). As for his illness, it was in no way special: five people in twenty get cancer, and four of these die of it. Leçons mentions no medical presence, and its continuity suggests that Haesler may have spent his last months with the Jaccottets.

Leçons, "interrogeant, me rappelant sa fin" (P/L, p.159), are general ones, prompted but not limited by this particular bereavement. The "nous" of whom they speak means in the first place the poet and his wife; but it also means the reader confided in, and all the living as witnesses of death.

The title of the work was not calculated to attract readers:<sup>23</sup> there are harsh lessons to be learnt in our experiences of grief and horror - we are "Instruits au fouet" (P/L, p.171). But they are lessons which Jaccottet felt obliged to explore for himself, hoping perhaps that they might be of value to others. A secondary meaning of this title is that of biblical texts read in a church service, in Latin "lectiones".<sup>24</sup> The reader is thus warned not to expect the lyricism of Airs, but something much heavier, with a certain didacticism, not overt, but implicit in the realism and seriousness of the work.

Jaccottet returns here to the theme of death treated already in Requiem and L'Ignorant. But it is no longer the case of a "Blessure vue de loin" (P/I, p.74) or the witnessed agony of a stranger (El, pp.109 ff): it is something very different, as these lines from L'Obscurité had foretold:

Il y a un temps où l'on peut parler de la mort comme d'une menace épouvantable; puis vient le temps où elle est vécue, si l'on peut ainsi parler, comme ce qui dès maintenant détruit la vie: il n'y a pas de commune mesure entre ces deux expériences (Obs, pp.56-7).

It seems that the poet had often felt he would always shy away

23. Jaccottet said once that Eluard's title Une Leçon de morale "a quelque chose d'un peu rebutant" (La Nouvelle Revue de Lausanne, 28 April, 1950.)

24. Jaccottet told me he was thinking of the "Leçons de Ténèbres". These are verses from the Lamentations of Jeremiah sung during Holy Week at the midnight "Tenebrae" services, which end with the candles being extinguished one by one, to symbolize the abandonment of Jesus by his disciples.

from the darkest realities of suffering:

Parler coûte si peu aux lèvres  
 Mais les coller sur la plaie  
 Si c'est là le seul chemin  
 J'aurai pourri sans pouvoir<sup>25</sup>  
 Passer ce chas pourrissant.

At the same time, however, he considered (as Rilke did) that he had no right to refuse, that to face up to the ugly and the terrible was essential to his integrity as a poet dedicated to truth. It might even be, perhaps, the narrow way to salvation.<sup>26</sup>

Leçons is certainly unlike Jaccottet's earlier writings. He begins, indeed, by referring back ironically to L'Effraie and L'Ignorant and denying that his credentials to discuss death were adequate:

Moi, poète abrité,  
 épargné, souffrant à peine,  
 j'osais tracer des routes dans le gouffre.<sup>27</sup>

Now, by contrast, he will write with a trembling hand about the physical progress and aftermath of a fatal illness. The texts that follow are chronological: at the start "l'aîné se couche/ presque sans force" (P/L, p.161); then he wastes away, "Il ne pèse presque plus" (p.164); he loses the power of speech and hearing (p.167); he suffers extreme pain (p.173); then one morning he dies, "Plus aucun souffle" (p.174), leaving only a corpse (p.175), which is duly buried

24. (contd) In 1961, by contrast, Jaccottet objected to "les jérémiades" (Prom, p.145).

25. Sem, p.81 (Jan. 1964). Cf P/A, p.153: "je ne soutiens pas la vue des plaies".

26. Cf P/L, p.173: "On passerait par le chas de la plaie,/ on entrerait vivant dans l'éternel..." This struggle against revulsion is the probable reason for Jaccottet's later remark that Leçons "n'a pas bénéficié, pour sa formation, de la cohérence intérieure dont sont issus les livres précédents. J'étais divisé..." (NRF, March 1976, p.66).

27. P/L, p.160. Cf A travers un verger, p.37.



(p.177). This scenario demonstrates that Leçons is not a collection of poems but a sequence<sup>28</sup> of twenty-one texts, more unified than "Le Livre des morts" or the various sections of Airs. One reviewer characterized this documentary unity very neatly: "Leçons, c'est le film d'une mort".<sup>29</sup>

The focus is more on the observers, however, than on the dying man. Only two texts concentrate on his feelings of defencelessness and stupefaction - these are the fifth one, and the eighth, which imagines his poignant words: "Qui m'aidera?" (P/L, p.168). The fundamental question is the question of the meaning of death, as asked by the witnesses who must somehow come to terms with it - who will some day (this is not said, but is it ever forgotten?) themselves die.

In the second poem, Jaccottet states this question in indirect terms: grapes and fruits are of dubious help, there is no easy passage, a bird cannot fly there. These images were, in Airs, lyrical images of hope;<sup>30</sup> but now in the face of fatal illness they seem to have become inoperative. Where can true hope be found? The poet must fall back on rather more modest resources:

28. This was affirmed later by the designation "poème" (Chants d'en bas, p.6 and Lum. p.99). Jaccottet refused permission for C.A. Hackett to publish extracts from it in New French Poetry (1973); the three printed by Clerval are the first, tenth and last (my numbering excludes the italicized opening quatrain and the bracketed interpolation on p.18 of A la lumière d'hiver).

29. Jean Breton in Magazine littéraire, May 1970, p.56.

30. Jaccottet is echoing various poems of Airs: the references to fruit on P/A, pp.115, 119 and 120, to flowing water on p.104, to birds on pp.104, 130 and 150. A later text states the problem explicitly: "J'ai cru, j'ai voulu croire (...) qu'en s'efforçant de garder les yeux tournés vers ces éclaircies qui semblent d'abord désigner un autre monde, on devait réussir à aborder sans douleur, sans rupture à ce monde; depuis que j'ai vu la mort d'un peu plus près, j'ai cessé de le croire" (Ver, pp.37-8).

plutôt le linge et l'eau changés  
la main qui veille,  
plutôt le coeur endurant.<sup>31</sup>

He must learn the difficult lesson of patience (P/L, p.163),  
while his world is trembling at its foundations (P/L, p.164).

A recurrent motif in Leçons is the notion of death as  
distance: "le maître (...) est emmené si loin" (P/L, p.161).  
This paradox of the man's absent presence can denote merely  
breakdown of communication as he loses his faculties:

Hélerons-nous cet étranger s'il a oublié  
notre langue? (...)  
c'est comme si on ne voyait plus que son dos. (P/L, p.167)

But the motif can also help the poet to define the kind of  
separation involved: it is something beyond the laws of  
spatial measurement, "en dehors, entraîné hors des mesures"<sup>32</sup>  
and it provides a telling image at the climax of the sequence:

Cadavre. Un météore nous est moins lointain. (P/L, p.175)

Another motif, stronger than that of distance, is the  
notion of a horrible force alien to man. While Jaccottet does  
not actually talk of an evil divinity, he knows that experien-  
ces of terror have often made people talk in such terms, and  
has recourse himself to language with religious connotations:

L'innommable enfonce les barrières de sa vie.  
(P/L, p.165)

....l'autre monde enfonce dans un corps  
son coin! (P/L, p.169)

L'illimité accouple ou déchire.

On sent un remugle de vieux dieux. (P/L, p.170)

These lines are the mildly mythological expression of the

31. P/L, p.162. These ideas had appeared earlier in his work,  
notably on P/A, p.140.

32. P/L, p.166. These reflections are developed in the 1977  
version by the interpolated page about "l'unique espace  
infranchissable" (Lum, p.18), which relates closely to  
Jaccottet's recurrent theme of the limit and the beyond.

poet's overpowering feeling that "on est réduit à vénérer et à vomir" (P/L, p.169).

As the victim's sufferings intensify, so does the imagery of fire and battle, of lacerating iron. Poems nine to fifteen contain more violence than anything Jaccottet has written. And they convey very well the turbulent minds of the onlookers:

C'est sur nous maintenant  
comme une montagne en surplomb (...)  
nous sommes pleins d'horreur et de pitié.  
Dans le jour hérissé d'oiseaux.<sup>33</sup>  
On le déchire, on l'arrache (...)  
notre fibre crie. (P/L, p.173)

The poet reflects that perhaps this awesome assault proves that human life is not something insubstantial (P/L, pp.171-2) - but that is little comfort. As for the consoling religious views of the pain of dying as the cry a new birth (P/L, p.173), Jaccottet cannot accept those: he sees no evidence of the soul passing upwards.

After the man's death, however, some brightness does penetrate the dark, beginning with the poem "J'ai relevé les yeux..." (P/L, p.176). This lyric, reminiscent of Airs, ends with the image "navettes ou anges de l'être", which would be puzzling had it not occurred near the start of Paysages, where we were told to imagine angels as "puissances promptes et limpides, navettes aveuglantes éternellement occupées à tisser, au-delà de toute allégresse, l'étoffe de la lumière".<sup>34</sup> Thus the poet turns anew to the visible world of light and nature,

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33. P/L, p.169. J.P. Martinet comments thus: "même l'oiseau tant aimé, si souvent chanté par le poète, devient menace, promesse de mort" (Matulu, March 1971, p.4). Cf Lum/C, p.37.

34. Pay, p.12. These angels thus resemble those of Rilke's elegies. As for the word "navettes", I cannot resist quoting from Corman's translation of Leçons: "turnips".

which after all survives human tragedies; as he does so, in Jacques Chessex's words, "la douleur, la révolte se muent lentement en acceptation - non pas en résignation".<sup>35</sup> In the final pages Jaccottet again uses the imagery of fruit and flowing water rejected at the beginning, and writes, as he had done in Airs, of the brightness of leaves and the cries of birds in flight. The evocation of weightlessness and serenity beginning "Et moi maintenant..."<sup>36</sup> is consciously opposed to the earlier images of heaviness and opacity:

un instant, d'embrasser le cercle entier du ciel  
autour de moi, j'y crois la mort comprise (...)  
toute la montagne du jour est allumée,  
elle ne me surplombe plus,  
elle m'enflamme.<sup>37</sup>

This momentary sense of illumination is, of course, no adequate counterweight to horror - no more than was the conclusion of L'Obscurité - but it does show the poet's impulse to regain hope.

The conclusion of the sequence is an uncertain one. Jaccottet's tone remains more often reflective than lyrical, and his reflections are agnostic ones. The most specific reference to religious beliefs about death comes in the poem about the funeral:

Le Nil va-t-il couler jusqu'à ce coeur? (P/L, p.177)

It is said that the characteristic barks found in Egyptian tombs represent the boat of Rā, who passes every night through

35. In NRF, Jan. 1970, p.113.

36. P/L, p.180. This recalls in particular P/A, pp.125 and 130. Jaccottet is writing of a specific place, "ici", presumably in the Grignan region - cf P/L, p.179: "les eaux qui prennent source en ces montagnes".

37. Loc. cit. The 1977 version of these last three lines removes the excited optimism: "la montagne?/ Légère cendre/ au pied du jour". (Lum, p.32.

the Underworld. And the Nile was thought to be connected, through two holes in the First Cataract, with the river that flowed in that world.<sup>38</sup> Thus the real action of the child who placed a little boat beside the dead body<sup>39</sup> renewed for the poet the question of possible communication with the dead, across the barrier of distance:

... si l'invention tendre d'un enfant  
sortait de notre monde,  
rejoignait celui que rien ne rejoint?<sup>40</sup>

He answered that question negatively: "Aujourd'hui je ne crois plus...", in a way that admits he once entertained such beliefs, presumably at the time of "Le Livre des morts". And the poem ends with a question to which a positive answer is implied:

Où est-ce nous qu'elle console sur ce bord?

When, on the final page of Leçons, Jaccottet attempts to define the dead man's status, he cannot decide:

ou tout à fait effacé (...)  
ou invisible habitant l'invisible,  
ou graine dans la loge de nos coeurs,  
quoi qu'il en soit... (P/L, p.181)

Yet here, for the first time, he addresses the man in the second person, as if expressing a tenacious wish to believe in communication of some kind, to refuse the powerful arguments for despair.

Leçons is not a work that draws attention to the author's evolving artistry, and yet it was written with skill and effort. Jaccottet's poetic style is less homogeneous here than in his

38. The Book of the Dead, ed. W. Budge, p.137.

39. The child in question was, Jaccottet told me, his niece, and Haesler's granddaughter.

40. P/L, p.177. Cf P/L, p.161: "je cherche ce qui peut le suivre". The image of "la barque" as a means of passage recurs on P/L, p.179. Jaccottet had already used it in Obs, p.76.

previous collections. Some poems of the sequence have mostly long lines, fully punctuated, with a gravity that recalls L'Ignorant. Others are like Airs, with few long lines if any, and sparse punctuation. It is as though the poet fluctuated between two idioms, between discursiveness and concision. This is apparent too in the grouping of lines on the page - sometimes eight or more form a paragraph, sometimes a single line is isolated by oppressive silences. And although the reader is seldom conscious of rhyme,<sup>41</sup> some poems are dominated by decasyllabic and alexandrin metre (P/L, pp.165-6), while others have few lines that may be recognized as a traditional mètre pair.

These variations in style betray the exceptional difficulty which Jaccottet had in writing the sequence. He explained in 1976 that:

Le seul de mes recueils qui ait fait l'objet d'un véritable travail, et même assez long, est Leçons; mais c'est aussi celui que j'ai toujours considéré comme le moins accompli (...) J'étais divisé, et aucun travail conscient ne peut réparer l'unité<sup>42</sup> déchirée sans qu'on voie aussitôt les coutures.

The dates he has given for its composition cover twelve months (November 1966 - October 1967); but he certainly made use of material written earlier,<sup>43</sup> and the minor changes in the 1977 edition testify to later work on it. Short of seeing the early drafts, we can only guess at the nature of Jaccottet's "véritable travail". But it probably involved a lot of reduction

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41. Except in the italicized preface (P/L, p.159), which in the 1977 version becomes a perfect quatrain à rimes croisées with equal lines of fourteen syllables.

42. In NRF, March 1976, p.66. Cf a note of May 1966: "J'ai cette ombre de douleur derrière moi maintenant quoi que j'écrive..." (Sem, p.102).

43. P/L, p.161 quotes from a note of September 1965 (Sem, p.92), and P/L, p.163 revises a short poem of June 1966 (Sem, p.110).

and compression. The poetry that has resulted is certainly economical - so much so that one critic even declared that "peu de textes, dans notre poésie, sont aussi dépouillés".<sup>44</sup> In an extreme case, one short isolated line of utter simplicity can speak volumes:

Qu'on emporte cela. (P/L, p.175)

and prompt a reviewer to describe the poem as "admirable de tragique pudeur".<sup>45</sup> In general the abruptness of Leçons serves the subject well, as does the sense of effort in the writing. At least two poems benefit visibly from Jaccottet's conscious self-criticism. The simile,

....il semble faible enfançon  
dans le lit de nouveau trop grand -

is immediately qualified:

enfant sans le secours des pleurs. (P/L, p.164)

And the line "Il a affaire ailleurs" (P/L, p.167) is corrected on the page to "Il n'a plus affaire à rien". Such repetition is usually avoided in Leçons, but in these cases it serves one of Jaccottet's chief stylistic ends: intensification.

In technique as in content, this work does not satisfy everyone's taste for harmony and light, not even the author's. Yet it displays - partly by being so disturbed - his great flexibility and maturity as a stylist. The best comment on it has come from the poet Jacques Réda, in a casual note:

Boulevard Raspail, encore un exemplaire des humbles

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44. P. Chappuis in La Quinzaine littéraire, 1 Dec. 1970, p.10. A text rejected and later salvaged appears as p.18 of A la lumière d'hiver (and the poem "L'Aîné" in Clerval p.149, dated 1966, may be another). - most of the 1977 revisions, however, make the poems more concise.
45. A. Bosquet, quoting this 15th text in Le Monde, 10 Jan. 1970. The brutal starkness of this text (and the seventh one) is reminiscent of the Guillevic of Exécutoire.

et terribles et très hautes Leçons de Jaccottet (prenons-en de la graine)... Je les relis puis je les distribue de droite et de gauche à des gens que je pense éblouir ou convaincre et qui font: ah. Mystère.<sup>46</sup>

The notebooks that Jaccottet kept in 1967 do not fully reflect the experience recorded in Leçons: we cannot see a sundering of personal unity in the final pages of La Semaïson. We can, however, sense there (and in the latter parts of Paysages) the absence or loss of the serenity found in the preceding period. And the notebooks of subsequent years have a generally sombre tone, not caused by that experience of bereavement, but occasioned, in part, by it. These notebooks have now been published as Journées (carnets 1968-1975),<sup>47</sup> a volume which must be chiefly viewed as an unpretentious sequel to La Semaïson.

Over half of this book consists of notes made between May 1971 and May 1973. One of its central passages is dated November 1972, and contains these phrases:

Le baume des arbres, du ciel, des couleurs, qui ne guérit pas, ou qui ne guérit plus, ne suffit plus.

L'inconnu à venir qui semble n'être plus que noirceur croissante...

Il n'y a presque plus un mot qui ne se soit vidé de sa substance, qui n'échappe à l'usage, ou alors ils n'ont plus de lien entre eux. Je voudrais écrire selon le cours des paroles les plus simples, et je ne le peux pas...

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46. In La Revue de Belles-Lettres, 1975, 3-4, p.128. Réda also reviews the work soberly in Les Cahiers du chemin, Oct. 1970, pp.113-4.

47. Editions Payot, Lausanne 1977. Parts of it had appeared in La Traversée VII, 1973 (unpaginated) and in La Revue de Belles-Lettres (1974, 1, pp.12-15 and 1975, 3-4, pp.55-59).



Je prends en horreur toute parole que j'ai dite,  
encore pleine d'illusion et de mensonge...

La lumière céleste ne suffit plus, ou n'est pas à  
déchiffrer.

Quand le chat-huant appelle à travers la nuit, il  
n'appelle rien ni personne...

Pourtant je n'ai pas perdu tout désir de chercher,  
de marcher encore. (Jou, pp.58-9)

This repeats, more or less consciously, the expression of  
helplessness at the start of Leçons,<sup>48</sup> and the author's  
irritation with his own words previously seen in La Semaïson  
(E.g. pp.98 and 102, March and May 1966). But it is graver  
still. The idea he once had of deciphering signs in nature  
is completely renounced.<sup>49</sup> It is a long time before we reach  
the "pourtant". And that conjunction, albeit typical,  
introduces a tentative litotes.<sup>50</sup>

We have seen that Paysages tended to explore positive  
experiences - Jaccottet's remark that "à la fin de certains  
textes, j'ai eu le sentiment d'aboutir à de l'élémentaire;  
parfois à une merveilleuse éclaircie" (p.68, March 1973)  
applies best to that work. Material that is less positive,  
however, tends to remain in notebook form, with the result  
that Journées often expresses the feeling of "ne pas aboutir".  
This is in the first place Jaccottet's sense of the difficulty  
of writing and of the inadequacy of his attempts (e.g. pp.25,  
31, 86, 95-6); his poetry seems to have stopped developing,  
perhaps because he thinks too hard about it. On a deeper

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48. E.g. "...pourront-ils encore m'aider?(...) Cela ne se  
tourne plus" (P/I, p.161).

49. Jou, p.61 (Dec. 1972) explicitly denies the kind of per-  
ception pursued in "L'Effraie". Cf pp.11-12 (Sept. 1968).

50. Cf p.61 (Dec. 1972): "... il reste ce 'pourtant' qui n'a  
pas plus de force qu'un regard. Il reste l'ignorance  
croissante".

level the problem is existential - the author is a middle-aged man preyed on by doubt and anxiety:

Moi avec mes arbres, mes fleurs (...), avec mes craintes, mes lâchetés, mon peu de vie, de sang, de paroles. Avec le souci de telle chose triste, ou horrible, ou sans issue qui devrait animer, enténébrer mes mots (...), avec le débat paralysant entre ce qui fait encore des mots un mouvement vrai et tout ce qui tend à les fausser (...); moi toujours avec mes vieilles questions ressassées et plus de pas en arrière qu'en avant peut-être et une voix qui ne s'affermir pas (...) quelqu'un au loin qui voit grandir sa solitude, son âge, sa faiblesse, sa peur... (Jou, p.36, May 1971)

Passages like that one support the self-condemning observation that "Je n'échappe guère au mal que je dénonce chez mes contemporains en poésie (fatigue, dessèchement, nihilisme)..." (p.97, Nov. 1975). He is torn between the hopes of his youth and the inescapable fact that he is growing old.

This tone of self-conscious apology or confession is much more pronounced in Journées than in La Semaïson. Another of the differences between these notebooks of 1968-75 and their predecessors is the paucity of poetry. The explanation for this for the years 1973-75 is easy: namely that (as in 1961-64) Jaccottet's best verse-poems were published separately, in this case as Chants d'en bas and A la lumière d'hiver. The period 1968-72, however, is a gap in his poetic production. He was exaggerating only slightly when he declared in November 1972<sup>51</sup> that he had written no poems since Leçons. A note of that date begins: "Dans la presque impossibilité

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51. Letter quoted in the introduction to Jaccottet, Breathings, translated by C. Corman, N.Y. 1974. Nevertheless, there are three short poems of 1969-72 in Clerval (pp.147-8) - these were based on notebook entries (Jou, pp.14, 15 and 49). And the four-part poem "Année" may also postdate Leçons - it appeared in the Bulletin de la Fondation C.F. Ramuz, 1971, pp.25-8, and has been set to music by E. Gaudibert.

ou impuissance, après des mois de mutisme à peu près total, contre cent difficultés que j'écarte, que j'essaie d'écarter..."<sup>52</sup> The poet's silence of this period thus resembles the loss of inspiration he suffered in 1957-60, with the important difference that now it was not a new experience. At that time he had made frequent unsuccessful attempts to write; perhaps he did likewise in 1968-72, but there is little trace of it. Journées contains only a handful of poetic fragments, some written in versets, like the two drafts on page 18 (Oct. 1969), and some in short lines, such as this haiku-like piece which merits quotation:

Vite, jouez sous les feuilles,  
enfants, dans l'éclaircie:  
la lumière est dans le jardin. (Jou, p.41, Sept.1971)

Some of the place occupied by poems in La Semaïson is taken up, in Journées, by accounts of dreams, both beautiful and nightmarish (pp.46, 51-3, 60-1, 75, 78-9, 90-1). But of more importance is the increase in critical and cultural material: Journées contains more numerous references to artists, musicians, and writers, both French and foreign; indeed it begins with a page of quotation (from Georges Bataille) and ends with reactions to a Mozart quintet. This is not a matter of name-dropping, of course, but part of the author's ongoing reflections about the European heritage - for example, his feeling that the pure light Dante saw can now only be glimpsed in fragments (p.87, Oct. 1974).

Jaccottet is not, however, a learned commentator on culture; he writes as a modern poet, and an ignorant, uncertain one,

Traînant parmi les ruines des grands poèmes, errant

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52. Jou, p.57 (Nov. 1972). Cf Prom, p.141, note of June 1961.

de l'un à l'autre, cherchant appui un instant, puis,  
découragé, refermant ces portes dégondées... (Jou, p.92,  
Sept. 1975)

He can be greatly impressed by what he reads, for example in the poetry of Mandel'shtam (pp.95-7, Oct.-Nov. 1975); but his comments on culture today are generally sceptical (e.g. pp.57, 64, 68, 95), and that scepticism applies also to theories of history and politics (pp.30-31, 50-51). As for questions of religion, Jaccottet repeats his refusal of all dogma, and voices also a distaste for certain liberal changes in the church;<sup>53</sup> yet his agnostic's view of Christ, spelt out in a long note of 1971 (pp.31-5, May 1971) is far from irreligious: "Le Christ aurait été l'un de ces hommes au rayonnement plus contagieux que d'autres, désignant une direction, une ouverture..." (p.34).

The most attractive notes in Journées are not the reflective ones, however, but those written "En me refermant sur moi, tous livres fermés hors le livre des choses, le livre du vécu, le livre concret..." (p.57, Nov. 1972). In these we find again the main project of La Semaïson, though in a more precarious form - the recording of natural beauty perceived in its immediacy and ephemerality:

...je suis entouré d'images, fuyantes, brisées, sans lien entre elles, qui passent et s'effacent comme des oiseaux, et je voudrais les rassembler encore, faute de quoi c'est moi qui m'éparpillerai avant le temps. (Jou, p.95, Oct. 1975)

These images strike the reader, sporadically, like gusts of unpolluted air. And added together they make up a rich inventory of things seen at different times and seasons. As with Jaccottet's earlier notes in this vein, they do not

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53. Jou, pp.34-4. Cf p.21 and Pay, pp.163-4.

invite analysis; but the best of them certainly ask to be quoted:<sup>54</sup>

## JANVIER

Corbeau montant d'un vol oblique et patient devant les nuages roses de l'aube.

## FEVRIER

Le Lez large, rapide, couleur de boue, de terre, comme un champ en mouvement, une eau labourée. Brouillard proche. Le bruit de l'eau dans le brouillard.

Plus haut, sur un versant boisé du rivage, un grand renard presque orange et blanc, à quelques pas de nous, s'enfuit.

## MARS

Les vols des pigeons autour des fermes, leurs miroirs. Au printemps: éclosion du ciel.

## AVRIL

Jeunes feuilles du figuier, comme autant de coupes à l'usage de lanternes, de veilleuses, laissant transparaître en jaune la lumière.

## MAI

L'irruption criarde, ou sifflante, des martinets, qui rend à nouveau sensible la hauteur du ciel.

## JUIN

La lumière du matin qui dore le dos des grands livres.

## SEPTEMBRE

Montée dans le bois au matin. Le soleil allume les branches, les feuilles humides. De grandes herbes ploient sous le poids de ces fruits limpides.

## OCTOBRE

Neige. La neige d'ici, qui vole et ne se pose pas, qui semblerait plutôt monter. Qui rend l'enfance. Heureuse. Pareille aux vols de moucheron en été, qui cèdent au vent. Nuages.

## NOVEMBRE

Le bruit des trembles jaunes dans la carrière, comme d'un ruisseau.

## DECEMBRE

Un homme penché sur le manche humide du râteau oublié sous la pluie, et contemplant le feu, le creusement, la caverne du feu.

In these brief notes the observer is totally subservient to

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54. These are selected from different years, as follows: Jan. 1974 (p.81), Feb. 1972 (p.46), March 1972 (p.48), April 1973 (p.73), May 1975 (p.89), June 1972 (p.55), Aug. 1975 (p.92), Sept. 1969 (p.13), Oct. 1969 (p.22), Nov. 1975 (p.98), Dec. 1972 (p.61). Journées contains no notes for July, though two did find their way into the NRF (Oct. 1974, p.137).

the thing observed. Next to them we may place the more extended poetic fragments on natural subjects - a fig-tree (pp.17-19), irises (p.29), flames (pp.33-4), poplars (p.72), cattle (pp.76-7) and doves (p.78). Here too Jaccottet's style is economical and self-effacing. Usually, like a haiku-poet, he refrains from stating his reactions to what he sees. And this helps him to convey the fascinating presence of the thing observed. Emotion is, however, always present, and sometimes it is explicit, in remarks like: "Un moment de stupeur..." (p.87, Oct. 1974); or "Encore une chose qui me désarme, qui m'enlève les mots" (p.17, Oct. 1969); or in this particularly tense note:

Et la beauté d'un matin d'hiver. A travers la vitre  
froide du coeur. (Jou, p.61, Dec. 1972)

The feeling of the whole book is epitomized in those two brief phrases.

Although place-names are not common, it may be safely assumed that most of the scenes observed are near Grignan - there are references, for example to the river Lez and the Mont Ventoux (pp.46, 97). But whereas La Semaïson gave little evidence of trips away from there, Journées contains quite a few notes on other places, both in France (Les Hautes-Alpes p.14, La Perche pp.38, 76-8) and abroad (Germany pp.54-6, Italy pp.84-5, 88-9). These would have been more numerous, in fact, if Jaccottet's impressions of visits to Holland and the Roussillon had not found a different form in a text of 1974, "Les Cormorans".<sup>55</sup> This is a rambling essay on the subject of travel. It begins with two direct quotations from

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55. In NRF, Oct. 1974, pp.137-52. Jaccottet told me that an earlier version of Journées, rejected for various reasons by Gallimard, had included a lot of travel notes.

the author's notebooks - thus underlining its connection with Journées<sup>56</sup> - before gathering into a continuous text images of a ruined priory in the Pyrenees, of two cormorants on the North Sea coast, and of the Haarlem market-place. It then records his reactions to a piece of harpsichord music heard at a concert,<sup>57</sup> and above all to a sombre group-portrait of five old ladies, Frans Hals's "Regentessen". The text concludes with the reflection that:

le voyage avait bien fini par devenir intérieur (...) on n'était pas sorti du labyrinthe (...) qui ramène toujours par les pas et les yeux vers le même monstre, vieux visage d'homme ou de femme qui crie, muettement ou pas, l'étonnement et l'horreur d'être détruit.<sup>58</sup>

The words just quoted bring to mind the poems of Leçons. They are even closer, however, to Jaccottet's second "livre de deuil",<sup>59</sup> Chants d'en bas, written in 1973. This work might more accurately be termed a book about the difficulty of discussing grief and suffering.

Chants d'en bas is less explicit than Leçons was about the author's reasons for grieving: the opening page, expressing a stunned sorrow about a woman who resembles her own tombstone, was not present in the first edition; and

56. They are dated July 6 and 11 (1973?). Jaccottet stayed in the Roussillon in February 1973, it seems, and visited Holland in autumn 1972 (Jou, p.58 mentions Rotterdam and Hals).

57. "La Silva" of Forqueray 1672-1745, played probably by Gustav Leonhardt, who recorded it on SEON (Philips) 657038.

58. In NRF, Oct. 1974, pp.151-2.

59. Note on p.99 of the collected volume A la lumière d'hiver, in which Chants d'en bas is printed immediately after Leçons - as if to follow the Lessons of Darkness with a De profundis.

four more poems pass before this woman is identified, metaphorically, in a line where the poet addresses himself:

Ainsi s'éloigne cette barque d'os qui t'a porté,  
ainsi elle s'enfonce... (Lum/C, p.48)

This is Jaccottet's ageing mother, "qui vit encore pourtant", but "ne vit presque plus que pour avoir peur et pour souffrir".<sup>60</sup> She had, in fact, been stricken by mental illness and committed to a geriatric asylum. The poet is thinking chiefly of her when he speaks of a terrible force,

... ce qui fait un être  
se recroqueviller sur lui-même, reculer  
tout au fond de la chambre, appeler à l'aide  
n'importe qui, n'importe comment (...)  
ce qui déchire la page (...)  
ce qui empêche de parler autre langue que de bête.  
(Lum/C, p.44)

He explains this at greater length in the prose-text A travers un verger, which is close to Chants d'en bas in time and in subject:

Ce ne sont pas les ombres qui peuvent déchirer la page (...). Ce n'est pas non plus la détresse humaine entre guillemets. C'est quand le singulier, le proche, le connu (que je ne nomme ainsi que par une pudeur peut-être déplacée) s'altère, c'est quand quelqu'un est déchiré ou détruit à côté de vous, devant vous. On ne peut exprimer cela que de manière absurde, grandiloquente: c'est comme si un corps réel, ignoblement maltraité par les années, rien que par les années (...) déchirait la page où sans peine, sans risque, les mots voudraient continuer à s'écrire.<sup>61</sup>

It is this frightening experience of destruction that places the poet "en bas", in terms of the spatial dichotomy familiar in his writings and so many others. His flights of lyricism

60. Jou, p.79 (Nov. 1973) and Ver, p.39.

61. Ver, pp.27-28. The parenthesis there states why he is not more precise. Cf Jou, p.27 (May 1971): "Il me semble absolument impossible de parler d'êtres proches tant qu'ils sont vivants ou proches, à moins d'une impudeur dont je ne suis pas capable".



are past, he is "retombé à terre".<sup>62</sup> Does this not strike him dumb, and tear his page in half?

The eight-poem sequence "Parler" is an anguished inquiry into the difficulty of poetry under such conditions. The first poem expresses horror at the safeness and the uselessness of writing: it is only a game, since the word for blood can never stain the page.<sup>63</sup> The second develops the image, used also in earlier works, of paper shrivelling in the fire, and then rejects it as inadequate to describe a person being destroyed by "ce qu'on ne peut apprivoiser dans les images".<sup>64</sup> The next poem, by contrast, puts the case for lyrical speech, "ce qui eut nom chanter jadis" (Lum/C, p.45). Is it really illusion, if it springs from things really seen, if it can bring back images of the past so miraculously as to give promise that one might be able to "guérir la mort"?<sup>65</sup> Faced with this contradiction, the fourth poem suggests that words can handle only some things, not including death, which rots them.

Poem five contains the emotional centre of the sequence. Jaccottet's concern is not mere words, but human misery; he

62. Lum/C, p.49. He had said twenty years earlier: "j'écris des mots dans l'air à la légère, / mais en bas le bas est peut-être atteint" (P/I, p.73); or more strongly: "Quelle oeuvre, quelle adoration et quel combat / l'emporterait sur cette agression par en bas?" (P/I, p.91)

63. Lum/C, p.41. Cf P/L, p.170: "à quelque singerie que se livre le poète, / cela n'entrera pas dans sa page d'écriture". This horror had already been expressed in Journées (p.59, Nov. 1972), and applies particularly to the unfinished 1971 text on the almond-orchard, "un ouvrage mené dans une chambre calfeutrée" (Ver, p.35).

64. Lum/C, p.44. Cf Jou, p.74 (May 1973), where the feminine adjective "Recroquevillée" conceals a reference to the poet's mother. The image appeared already in Prom, p.51 and Obs, p.134.

65. Lum/C, p.46. This image of passage recalls the hopes expressed, for example, in "Le Livre des morts" or in

extends the image of the sinking bark to include old people in general, and prays that they might receive, if not the "grand filet/ de lumière, inespérable" (Lum/C, p.48), then at least remission of pains and peaceful sleep.

The following pages return to the problem of writing: the poet admits that he cannot dispense with the inadequate tool of imagery; then he redefines his difficult task as "tresser un vague abri pour une proie insaisissable" - to strive for receptivity to mysterious truth.<sup>66</sup> After this restatement of long-held attitudes, Jaccottet exhorts himself to cast aside morbidity:

singer la mort à distance est vergogne,<sup>67</sup>  
avoir peur quand il y aura lieu suffit.

And there the sequence ends, except that a postscript added in the 1977 edition sounds a note of extreme self-disgust. In five lines (which scan, ironically, as alexandrins) the poet calls himself a "sententieux phraseur" whose mouth proves to be no more than an "égout baveux" (Lum/C, p.53).

In the poems of "Parler" Jaccottet shows generally less confidence in words than he had shown before. Alain Clerval, commenting on his poetry and prose of 1973-74, emphasizes this point:

Jusqu'ici, la démarche du poète reposait sur une confiance, éprouvée sans cesse au contact des apparences sensibles, dans les vertus de la parole, dans

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65. (contd) the image of the obol (Obs, p.74, P/A, p.111). The lines in italics are memories of Jaccottet's childhood in Moudon - a similar fragment in Journées (pp.69-71, March 1973) proves this.

66. Lum/C, p.50. The image on this page of a festival with muffled drumming recalls p.142 of Eléments.

67. Lum/C, p.51. Cf Ver, p.43: "Ce n'est pas une raison pour craquer en quelque sorte d'avance".

son pouvoir éclairant. Soudain le doute ou l'angoisse se sont glissés dans l'esprit du poète... (Clerval, p.95)

These words, however, overstate what confidence Jaccottet had possessed previously; and the adverb "Soudain" is quite mistaken. A reading of "Parler" should, on the contrary, remind us how constantly in the past Jaccottet had expressed doubt and anxiety, and how frequently those expressions involved uncertainty about language. It can be seen in retrospect that the problem of false and true language had always concerned him, and had at several points threatened to silence him. When he writes here: "Est-ce mensonge, illusion?" (Lum/C, p.45), he is echoing a note of La Semaison: "de plus en plus, j'entends le mensonge des paroles, ce qui me paralyse", and paraphrasing a poem of twenty years earlier:

...Mais tout cela  
ne serait-il qu'un vol de paroles dans l'air?<sup>68</sup>

Uncertainty about words was indeed quite common in L'Ignorant, and Jaccottet's distrust of imagery took up many pages of La Promenade.<sup>69</sup> We can say, further, that his distinctive voice owes a lot to this constant suspicion of language.

Starobinski has said of it:

...la pleine intensité lui vient de son horreur du trop dire (...) Pure est cette voix qui ne veut pas être belle et chantante sans l'avoir mérité. Pure est cette voix qui ne consent à prononcer le mot pureté qu'en se demandant si elle en possède le droit. Elle renonce à tout ce qui ne fait pas la preuve de son bien fondé, de sa nécessité: il lui arrive - hors

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68. Sem, p.98 (March 1966) and P/I, p.57. Even earlier, in L'Effraie, he had written: "ce n'est pas ces mots hâtifs qu'il nous faudrait" (P/E, p.35).

69. E.g. P/I, pp.53, 54, 58, 73, 89, 91 and Prom, pp.112-133 (cf Obs, p.160).

des heures de grâce - de ne pouvoir dire que ce renoncement.<sup>70</sup>

Those words, dating from 1975, apply particularly well to Chants d'en bas.

The six poems that follow "Parler" show no increase in lyricism, yet they are called "Autres chants". Jaccottet addresses the first and longest of these to "mes amis d'un temps", friends who are running, like him, the risks of ageing - becoming miserly, fearful, self-deceptive, perhaps insane:

N'y a-t-il donc aucun moyen de vaincre  
ou au moins de ne pas être vaincu avant le temps?  
(Lum/C, p.57)

A particular temptation is to turn backwards towards the past, to retreat into one's memories<sup>71</sup> - and the darkness of the present makes this hard to resist. Yet Jaccottet repeats the positive injunction: "cherchons plus loin, là où les mots se dérobent..." in the hope of being able to "redresser avec de l'invisible chaque jour".<sup>72</sup> This rather desperate poem about approaching old age helps to explain the harshness of another poem, about a different transition in life: "Arrête-toi, enfant..." It is spoken to a girl, and urges her to hesitate before facing the horror of adulthood.<sup>73</sup> Its

70. In La Revue de Belles-Lettres, 1975, 3-4, pp.135-6. Jaccottet himself has remarked that: "je ne puis m'empêcher d'éprouver que certains mots, dans ces circonstances données, semblent plus 'vrais' que d'autres, que je ne peux absolument pas en user indifféremment" (Ver, p.29).
71. Nostalgia for childhood had been felt - and condemned - in Eléments (pp.71, 85, and 104).
72. Lum/C, pp.58-9. The reference to words suggests that the friends in question are literary associates of Jaccottet's youth. Parts of this poem are summarized in A travers un verger: "On devient plus avide et plus avare. On vieillit quand on commence à se retourner" (Ver, p.23, cf P/E, p.32), and the concluding image of the balance is developed there (Ver, pp.25-6).
73. Lum/C, p.32. The girl in question may well be Jaccottet's

final image is one of the most violent in all of Jaccottet's work:

...recule - si tu ne veux pas crier de peur  
sous le harpon.

Between these, two rather strange poems (Lum/C, pp.60-2) concern mental visions of women, such as are composed in the night by dream or memory, by desire and regret. The penultimate page of the collection is more typical: "Ecris vite ce livre..." has the mood of impatience seen at the end of "Parler".<sup>74</sup> This voice telling the poet to hurry does not ask for a message of revelation, such as was sent "à l'ange, de l'Eglise de Laodicée";<sup>75</sup> yet the words requested should offer some shreds of comfort to humanity:

relie, tisse en hâte, encore, habille-nous,  
bêtes frileuses, nous taupes maladroites,  
couvre-nous d'un dernier pan doré de jour... (Lum/C, p.64)

The final poem is less hopeful. Is it somehow possible for poets to mediate a mysterious kind of light? Jaccottet, who once thought so, now sounds a tragic note:

On voudrait croire que nous sommes tourmentés  
pour mieux montrer le ciel. Mais le tourment  
l'emporte sur ces envolées....<sup>76</sup>

73. (contd) daughter Marie, who was then about thirteen. But the idea had occurred before: "On tremble pour leurs jours à venir" (Sem, p.107, June 1966). When this poem first appeared, with only the two that surround it, in the NRF of February 1974, the context was not strong enough to support it.
74. Lum/C, p.64. Cf p.51. This attaque seems to come out of Gustave Roud: "vite! ces quelques mots ici, avant le retour au silence" (Le Repos du cavalier, 1958, in Gustave Roud, p.175) - but haste and rapidity are common motifs in Jaccottet (e.g. Obs, p.133, P/A, pp.116, 126, 133).
75. The allusion is to the Revelation of St John, chapter 3.
76. Lum/C, p.65. Cf El, p.148: "Une fois admis le lien (...) de la poésie avec ce mystère (...) l'on ne s'étonnerait plus de certaines destinées: Baudelaire, Hölderlin entre autres". The idea is repeated in A travers un verger: "nous ne sommes que des instruments

And all that remains is a deep pity.

It must be apparent that Chants d'en bas supersedes Leçons as Jaccottet's most pessimistic collection of poems so far. Its lack of charm and novelty makes it also the least enjoyable. Yet it is totally consistent with his earlier work, and it impresses by a kind of terrible honesty. Jacques Chessex was not delirious (though he did exaggerate) when he called it "un pur chef-d'oeuvre" and declared:

Jamais l'auteur n'avait exprimé à la fois si hautement et si simplement ses préoccupations fondamentales: tourment de vivre, chagrin au souvenir irréparable des défunts, angoisse...<sup>77</sup>

There is, however, one important preoccupation omitted from this list: the poet's concern for light. Its relative absence is the main reason why these "chants" sound more like "des plaintes". Jaccottet's next sequence, "A la lumière d'hiver", is in part an attempt to remedy this - as we shall see shortly.

Before that, however, we must give separate consideration to the prose-text A travers un verger, to which several references have already been made. The first part of this work is actually two years older than Chants d'en bas - it concerns a flowering almond-orchard seen in April 1971. Jaccottet's poetic description of it, begun the following month, might have found a place in the second edition of Paysages (as did "Sur le seuil", written that same year), except that it was never finished. It starts well, evoking

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76.(contd) imparfaits, dont le plus haut usage est de faire circuler de la lumière - contre l'obscurité qui semble fatalement s'emporter" (Ver, p.40, cf p.26). Rilke's view of poetry is a similar one.

77. In 24 Heures, Lausanne, 2-3 Aug. 1975.

the ephemeral beauty of the blossom in tentative images such as "brouillard, essaim, écume, neige, nébuleuse, grésil", and suggesting why it gives such pleasure: "Signes d'un autre monde, trouées?" (Ver, p.12). But this enterprise is beset by problems of language:

Il fut un temps où quelques mots simples auraient suffi à dire cela. Ces mots, nous en disposons encore, mais ils n'ont plus ce pouvoir. Les arbres gardent le leur. (Ver, p.13).

Obstacles of this kind had been surmounted in the texts of Paysages, even in "Travaux au lieu dit l'Etang". But here Jaccottet was less fortunate: he abandoned his pages for months, perhaps years, before writing a much more sombre continuation.

This second part begins "Méfie-toi des images" (Ver, p.23), and proceeds to enlarge on the themes of "Parler":

...les mots ne sont jamais que des mots. Faciles. A de certains moments, devant certaines réalités, ils m'irritent, ou me font horreur; et moi<sup>78</sup> à travers eux, qui continue à m'en servir...

He would like to think that poetic words can aid life and the human spirit; but really they are useless - "des roues de plumes".<sup>79</sup> And Jaccottet looking at the almond-trees is himself "saisi (...) de doute quant à la réalité des issues que ses images les plus pures semblaient lui désigner" (Ver, p.36). He finds he can account for his fascination with white blossom in terms of an ancient dream of magic passage - and the fact that he can explain it seems to destroy its validity.<sup>80</sup> This poses a serious question of meaning; it is,

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78. Ver, p.28. Cf p.35 and Lum/C, p.41.

79. Ver, p.31. This repeats the debate of Eléments, page 158: Is poetry "la gardienne de l'Etre" or "un jeu frivole"? But now Jaccottet insists more on the latter.

80. Ver, pp.24-5. Similarly (pp.33-4) he "explains away" his pleasure at the sight of a snowtipped mountain (cf P/A, p.103 and Pay, p.19) or his images of birds (Lum/C, p.49).

in Clerval's words:

un doute beaucoup plus grave et qui pourrait aller jusqu'au nihilisme, quant à la réalité de la parole, soupçonnée non seulement de trahir le sens, mais de n'être plus que le reflet illusoire, la projection fallacieuse de la rêverie intérieure. (Clerval, p.97)

As we read Jaccottet's struggles with his disbelief, however, we realise that the main reason for it lies not in language, but in experienced reality. The central problem of A travers un verger is the same as that of Chants d'en bas: the problem of death, particularly the death of the mind. Jaccottet mentions his own ageing several times, and states with certainty that "mon oeil qui imagine quelquefois des trouées lumineuses dans le ciel est condamné à s'user, à se fermer, à pourrir à son tour".<sup>81</sup> But just as often he alludes to another person; onto the vision of the almond-blossom there comes to superimpose itself that of "un vieux visage angoissé", presumably the author's mother, "malmenée et douloureuse", who is "l'image de ce que nous risquons d'être tous un jour" (Ver, pp.26, 46, 39). No wonder he couldn't persevere with his lyrical description: "je me suis arrêté, inquiet, honteux, moi plein de rêveries sur les fleurs, faux sage, douteux juge, piètre vivant" (Ver, p.39).

Jaccottet is experiencing here, intimately, the spectacle of "l'effondrement des autres" (Ver, p.40), which had been confronted by the narrator in L'Obscurité. As in that book,<sup>82</sup> he admits that "la mort (...) m'interdirait dès maintenant de vivre si j'acceptais sa fascination" (Ver, pp.28-9); even that suicide often seems a logical step to take (Ver, p.41). He suggests too that the best models of fortitude are offered

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81. Ver, p.34. Cf pp.23, 26.

82. E.g. Obs, p.156. And even earlier (Prom, pp.137-8).



not by philosophers but by craftsmen (Ver, pp.42-43), and regrets that he is incapable of joining their narrow, solid world. The poet cannot simply follow Pindar's advice to "épuiser le champ du possible"; the limits he accepts must remain provisional ones that do not altogether deny the unknown. Jaccottet will not, that is, obey the part of Pindar's injunction which he doesn't quote: "N'aspire pas à la vie immortelle".<sup>83</sup> He is not closing the door on his past sources of inspiration:

Je n'en suis pas quitte pourtant avec la force des rêveries. Je ne comprends pas qu'elles puissent naître, et je n'ai pas tout à fait perdu le goût d'y céder (Ver, p.38).

The argument of A travers un verger is rather disjointed - indeed there are more breaks and parentheses than is usual in Jaccottet's prose - yet the text maintains its emotional power. And it gives a peculiar pleasure at the end, when the sceptical poet yields again to the image of almond-blossom:

...moi, future loque, avant de basculer dans la terreur ou l'abrutissement, j'aurai écrit que mes yeux ont vu quelque chose qui, un instant, les a niés (Ver, p.49).

Those last two quotations cast doubt on Clerval's view of Jaccottet's recent career. He wrote, probably in 1975, that:

Chants d'en bas et (...) A travers un verger marquent un tournant dans son oeuvre. On peut même y voir une rupture par rapport à son itinéraire antérieur.<sup>84</sup>

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83. See Ver, p.45. The complete line of Pindar, in Puech's translation, serves as epigraph to Camus's Mythe de Sisyphe.

84. Clerval, p.95. Published early in 1976, those remarks are certainly premature. There have been ruptures in Jaccottet's work, of course: in 1957-1960, and at the start of Leçons where he states his distance from his writings of "autrefois" (P/L, pp.160-2).

At the end of 1975, however, Jaccottet penned the following lines, which recall more ecstatic poems of twenty years earlier:

...Le noir n'est plus ce mur  
 encrassé par la suie du jour éteint,  
 je le franchis, c'est l'air limpide, taciturne,  
 j'avance enfin parmi les feuilles apaisées,  
 je puis enfin faire ces quelques pas, léger  
 comme l'ombre de l'air...<sup>85</sup>

A group of poems written in 1974-76 have now been published as A la lumière d'hiver. Though preceded in the same volume by Leçons and Chants d'en bas, it is not a work of grief - it is a work of persistence.

In these new poems we see that Jaccottet, in spite of his distress at suffering and mortality (including his own, at age fifty), in spite of voracious doubt and disillusionment with the hopes and dreams that nourished his past writings, persists in putting words together to form some sort of affirmation.

The opening poem, "Dis encore cela..." (Lum, pp.71-2) displays excellently both the strength and the precariousness of that affirmation. It begins with imperatives addressed by the poet to himself, and if we read chiefly the principal clauses we obtain an injunction to hope beyond death:

Dis encore cela...essaie...Espère encore que le  
 dernier cri du fuyard...soit tel...qu'il échappe...  
 à l'espace où la balle de la mort ne dévie jamais,  
 et...soit recueilli...ailleurs. Dernière chance  
 pour toute victime sans nom: qu'il y ait... mêlé  
 au monde que nous traversons...de cela que la voix  
 ne peut nommer, de cela que rien ne mesure, afin  
 qu'encore il soit possible d'aimer la lumière...

The possibility of contact with the unknown is entertained,

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85. Lum, p.86. Cf. "Sur les pas de la lune" (P/I, p.71) and other poems of "Paroles dans l'air".

albeit in the subjunctive mode; the arguments for complete despair are resisted. This faux texte, however, misrepresents the poem: in it Jaccottet's affirmations are hedged around by so many attenuations and qualifications that they cannot be quickly detected. His second and third sentences are long and complex - only a few repeated words preserve their coherence - giving a feeling of difficulty compounded by numerous enjambements. The poet proceeds by self-correction, proposing such positive words as "ailleurs" or "aimer", and then rejecting or withdrawing them because they are not true enough. This manifests his uncertainty about the world and about language.

It is a sad and stumbling poem, yet it gives a sense of obstacles traversed, almost of consolation. It shows also that Jaccottet has not completely abandoned what used to be a belief in "l'illimité". He insists here on its ineffability - "de cela que la voix ne peut nommer" - recalling the note of 1971 which stated his religious position:

une supposition qu'il y aurait(...)quelque part, nulle part - au-delà de ces distinctions -, quelque chose, nulle chose - au-delà de ces contraires - comme une lumière totale où tout, où le pire s'expliquerait, n'aurait plus besoin d'être expliqué, sans qu'il nous soit aucunement possible de comprendre, ni de dire comment.<sup>86</sup>

An important difference, however, between that passage and the poem in question lies in the use of the term "lumière". In A la lumière d'hiver, light is not primarily a symbolic term for "spiritual illumination in the winter of the soul"; Jaccottet means firstly "la lumière, elle, comme la terre la

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86. Jou, p.34 (May 1971). The poem dates from Jan.-Sept. 1974 (Lum, p.99).

recueille",<sup>87</sup> particularly in the region he lives in.

After this opening poem come two unequal groups, all completed in the winter of 1975-76,<sup>88</sup> which may be viewed as a loose sequence. The first four pursue the discussion of time and language. The poet refers to himself as "Un homme qui vieillit", as one who has seen how "l'étoffe du corps se déchire".<sup>89</sup> He looks back from a distance at his youthful self, remarking ironically on his past ambitions and images:

On bâtissait le char d'Elie avec des graines  
légères, des souffles, des lueurs...<sup>90</sup>

The formula "C'est la fragilité même qui est la force", though not a direct quotation from his early works - it is too assertive and epigrammatic for that - alludes to the paradox by which he had viewed death as a source of strength.<sup>91</sup> That had seemed possible once, but language has proved more difficult than he had thought. Words are facile and empty, he repeats, for reasons already explored; he

87. Lum, p.72. See Pay, pp.12ff for remarks about winter light; or the note in L'Entretien des Muses (p.309) where Jaccottet tells how, after visiting an old man in a mental asylum, he returned home, "par les routes les plus détournées de Vaucluse, encore bordées de roseaux, dans la compagnie des tranquilles chasseurs. C'était une fois encore l'hiver du Sud, où presque plus rien ne retient la lumière céleste". His title A la lumière d'hiver, is in one sense a dedication.
88. According to Lum, p.99. Those on pp.85-87, 90 and 95 appeared with minor variants in La Revue de Belles-Lettres, 3-4, 1975, actually published in 1976.
89. Lum, pp.81, 80. Thought is powerless to rectify this, he says, echoing the fifth poem of "Parler" (Lum/C, p.48).
90. Lum, p.77. This page recalls the start of Leçons (P/L, pp.160-2).
91. E.g. Prom, pp.38, 101, 121, 130, 133, P/I, p.76. Obs, p.147, and in Domaine Suisse, Oct.-Nov. 1956, p.66.

cannot make them attain their objective:

De nouveau je m'égare en eux,  
de nouveau ils me font écran, je n'en ai plus  
le juste usage...<sup>92</sup>

Nevertheless, Jaccottet has not completely abandoned words, because (as he says straight after the lines just quoted):

.... toujours plus loin  
se dérobe le reste inconnu, la clef dorée.

And the rôle of words might possibly be to "faire sentir/ ce qu'ils n'atteignent pas".<sup>93</sup> Thus, while the poet seems to concentrate on a brutal form of subtraction, on denying reasons for confidence, he keeps insisting on the remainder. These poems hinge on such typical expressions of opposition as "néanmoins" (p.77), "toutefois" (p.81), or simply "mais", as here (p.79):

"Mais quelque chose n'est pas entamé par ce couteau  
ou se referme après son coup comme l'eau derrière  
la barque".

That line of thought, continued (again in inverted commas) on the next page) rests on a feeling that the arguments of nihilism do not account for all experience, a feeling Jaccottet had expressed before, for example in this note of 1972:

...à tout effort de compréhension quel qu'il soit  
résiste toujours une "tache noire", une dernière  
opacité, on peut penser que c'est justement par  
cette tache noire que quelque chose comme une lueur  
folle peut passer, un espoir (mais le mot est trop  
clair) s'infiltrer.<sup>94</sup>

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92. Lum, p.82. Cf "Parler" and A travers un verger, passim.

93. Lum, p.82. A recent article by Michael Bishop gives this interpretation: "words exist perhaps merely to show the search carried out, to demarcate the failure, to point to their 'other side', to what lies beyond them, unattainable" (in Swiss-French Studies, May 1980, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, p.52).

94. Jou, p.50, May 1972. It has antecedents as early as 1959. (Sem, pp.19-21).

Now Jaccottet had always thought that these hope-giving exceptions are not accessible by intellectual reasoning - he repeats this view in the poem on page 81. His belief that they can be reached by poetry is, however, much weaker than it was. Yet we sense, as we turn from these more reflective poems to the later part of A la lumière d'hiver, that Jaccottet continues to value lyricism. It is as though he was hearkening to the "démon familier" mentioned in A travers un verger who advised him thus:

Toute réflexion continue et systématique sur ce sujet  
ne ferait que t'épuiser en vain - et même t'éloigner  
de toute solution. Fie-toi plutôt aux bonds  
capricieux de l'intuition. (Vér, p.30).

Images of purity are certainly suspect, but it may be possible to "les garder là, lointaines, menacées, précaires, à l'intérieur d'un ensemble plus rude et plus opaque",<sup>95</sup> and thus to persevere.

"Aide-moi maintenant, air noir et frais..." The poem on page 95 is an evocation, at first an invocation, of the night air. Before going to bed the poet walks in the garden, and feels a brief sense of freedom and wonderment. He speaks of unhindered movement - passage - and of free access to the strange secret of the night: "autre chose de plus caché, mais de plus proche". Likewise the poem "Nuages de novembre" (p.90) suggests contact with something mysterious, aided by the serenity of the season.<sup>96</sup> The author enjoins himself to

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95. Ver, p.36. Cf Jou, p.95: "je suis entouré d'images, fuyantes, brisées (...) et je voudrais les rassembler encore(...)puiser le meilleur de mes eaux cachées..." (Oct., 1975).

96. These lines of November 1975 recall a note made the month before (Jou, pp.94-5), and echo a phrase of "Champ d'octobre" (P/A, p.132): "La terre toute entière visible".

listen "à travers le vacarme croissant/ qui est en toi et hors de toi", so as to hear the secret which binds together the various elements of landscape he evokes. He may thus benefit from "cette lumière qui ne s'éteint pas la nuit".<sup>97</sup> In speaking of the pleasure and consolation given by images of nature, these poems continue a theme most evident in La Semaïson. But their tone is more uncertain, more hypothetical. This is particularly true of the brief lyric beginning "...Et le ciel serait-il clément..." (Lum, p.91), which is a single unanswered question. This piece has unusual density: literally Venus must be the Morning Star visible at the horizon and reflected in the peasant's ploughshare; but Venus is also the love-goddess who visits the patient poet with the hint of an unimaginable reward, "une herbe autre que l'herbe".

The vision of "Une étrangère" (Lum, p.88) does not involve nature at all, it is dream-image, like the poems about women in Chants d'en bas,<sup>98</sup> but more convincingly treated. "N'est-il pas permis/ de lui faire un peu de place...?" asks Jaccottet; and that question applies more generally to all fleeting images:

Tout cela qui me revient encore - peu souvent -  
n'est-il que rêve, ou dans le rêve  
y a-t-il un reflet qu'il faille préserver.<sup>99</sup>

97. Lum, p.90. An earlier version was more explicit about the benefits: "Le secret qui vous lie/ a-t-il cessé d'être celui que me délivre?" (La Revue de Belles-Lettres, 3-4, 1975, p.49).

98. Lum/C, pp.60-62. The erotic character of these calls to mind an earlier note: "la matière des rêves (...) sexe et violence (...) Il est probablement vrai que ma poésie néglige trop ces étages inférieurs" (Sem, pp.136-7, Sept. 1967). Such visions of enticing women are indeed rare (P/A, p.121, Pay, pp.54, 89, Jou, p.46, Feb. 1972).

99. Lum, p.92. This poem refers backwards, especially to p.90, but also to p.71; the same question appeared in A travers un verger (e.g. p.36).

Perhaps they are mere illusions; the world is, after all, a cracked vase and the human skull a fragile pitcher; but what is the mind?

Qu'est-ce toutefois, dedans, que cette eau amère  
ou douce à boire?

The last poems in the group suggest that something worthwhile may still remain. Whereas Chants d'en bas ended with tears of pity, the poem here, "Les larmes quelquefois...", prays that a harvest might spring from them (Lum, p.93). And the one beginning "Ecoute, vois..." (Lum, p.95) hopes that the apparent crossing of light between earth and sky may figure a meeting of love: "Dis que cela peut être vu..." writes Jaccottet, echoing the poem "Dis encore cela..." (Lum, p.71). The images on this page could have been prompted by elements of landscape;<sup>100</sup> but a contemporary note relates them to a piece of music - Mozart K. 516. This is the g-minor string quintet composed in May 1787, a mature and by no means optimistic work.<sup>101</sup> And though the poem can stand on its own, many elements seem to be inspired by the music: phrases rising from below or descending from above, moments of lightness and simple calm, expressions of pain, fear, or surprise, and excited running passages.

In two of the poems the winter image of snow is given a positive value: it suggests the purity of moonlight;<sup>102</sup> and

100. That of Lazarus has arisen previously from the sight of a figtree in the mist (Jou, p.17, Oct. 1969).

101. Jou, p.101, Dec. 1975. Alfred Einstein (Mozart, 1946, p.192) likens this string quintet to the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane.

102. Lum, p.94, another poem based on a notebook entry (Jou, p.100, Dec. 1975).



it gives protection to human patience and fidelity (Lum, p.96). Here we find further reference to the "vieux visage suppliant" of page 85, which may again be that of the poet's mother.<sup>103</sup> This person's eyes are the subject of the final poem, a strange, verbless piece which alludes to the author's own future death, and opens out onto a perspective of cosmic space.

A la lumière d'hiver is less pessimistic than Chants d'en bas, and the verse seems a little freer and smoother. Yet from the point of view of poetic style the two collections may be considered together. They appear as a development of one of the two idioms found in Leçons: the discursive one.<sup>104</sup> They are, predominantly, reflective poems, allowing a measure of repetition and relaxation, yet maintaining language more sensitive, supple, fragile and fastidious than ordinary conversation.

Since the lines of verse are seldom rhymed or isosyllabic, and often enjambés, the casual reader would not notice how close they remain to traditional prosody. The vast majority of lines are written in mètres pairs, particularly of twelve and ten syllables. Page 88 is actually dominated by alexandrins binaires ou ternaires:

Une étrangè-/re s'est glissée/ dans mes paroles,  
beau masque de dentel-//le avec, entre les mailles...

The third most common metre is the fourteen-syllable line characteristic of Jaccottet, with its coupe after the sixth or eighth syllable. Here it is used in conjunction with the

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103. This is a guess, supported by Ver, p.26.

104. Even a short piece like "...Et le ciel serait-il clément..." (Lum, p.91) does not approach the concision found in Leçons. The discursive style of verse has antecedents in La Semaïson and Requiem.

alexandrin:

Chose brève, le temps// de quelques pas dehors,  
mais plus étrange enco-//re que les mages et les dieux.  
(Lum, p.87)

The poem "Ecris vite..." (Lum/C, p.64) is particularly striking in this respect:

ou pire que cela...//  
Cours au bout de la ligne,  
comble ta page avant// que ne fasse trembler  
tes mains la peur - de t'égarer, // d'avoir mal, d'avoir  
peur...

The witty reference to "la ligne" and the powerful finesse of repeating "peur" are not typical. But the skilful exploitation of enjambement and rejet has many parallels, even in lines that are not mètres pairs. It greatly intensifies these lines:

sans vous brûler - comme si, au contraire,  
on était dans son voisinage plus ardent, comme s'il  
vous rendait le souffle, comme si  
l'on était de nouveau un homme jeune devant qui  
l'avenir n'a pas de fin... (Lum/C, p.44)

The chief virtues of this style were defined very neatly by the reviewer who commended: "une écriture d'autant plus pathétique qu'elle est(...) discrète et sans cuirasse, qu'elle se refuse les haussements de ton".<sup>105</sup> The poetic expression of feeling is, in the end, heightened by the restraints of truthfulness; and the words that result are indeed "un chant". The author's own recorded dissatisfaction with his recent work<sup>106</sup> testifies at the same time to the exactingness which gives it strength and conviction. Jaccottet never settles for easy solutions. One of his most recent articles has this to say:

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105. Jean-Claude Gâteau, reviewing Chants d'en bas in NRF, May 1975, p.89.

106. Jou, pp.95-6 (Oct. 1975), not to mention Lum/C, p.53.

Je ne puis parler de rien de ce qui me touche sans aboutir exactement, sempiternellement, au même point (...) une "chose" difficile à dire - difficile à proportion, semble-t-il, qu'elle est plus émouvante et plus centrale: l'énoncer directement, tout bêtement, lui fait perdre son pouvoir; du coup, les approximations, les analogies se pressent autour d'elle, quelquefois très lâches (...) enfin, irrité par ces déviations, ces trahissements, ces ornements que bientôt menacera la maniérisme, j'essaie de revenir au dire simple; le plus souvent sans plus de succès; quelquefois, peut-être enrichi par ces détours, un peu moins déçu.<sup>107</sup>

This sentence explains very well the alternations found in the poems between decorative imagery and "des mots plus pauvres et plus justes" (Lum, p.89). But it goes further, in relating the author's stylistic vacillations to the central and elusive thing which gives unity to a particularly single-minded oeuvre.

Jaccottet had made some similar remarks, seventeen years before, about his central concern. He wrote in his notebook of March 1960: "C'est le Tout-autre que l'on cherche à saisir. Comment expliquer qu'on le cherche et ne le trouve pas, mais qu'on le cherche encore?" (Sem, p.39); and in the final pages of L'Obscurité:

Toute parole tend à fixer quelque chose qui semble désirer d'être fixé, et périr de l'être. On ne peut donc ni se taire, ni parler sans se corriger perpétuellement. (...) C'est pourquoi notre tâche ne peut cesser qu'à notre mort. (Obs, p.166)

Until the author dies, his work must be considered incomplete. But in one sense Jaccottet's oeuvre will always be seen unfinished, because the very nature of his undertaking excludes the possibility of triumph or finality. To think that one has

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107. In NRF, Jan. 1977, pp.41-42.

grasped "l'illimité" would be, in his view, an illusion (merely pushing the true limits back out of reach), or else a disappointment (since the thing grasped would cease to be the thing sought). Either way, one is ultimately unsatisfied.

And yet in Jaccottet's case there is much on the credit side. The tenacity with which he has so far pursued his unending quest has its own dignity. And the clarity with which he has expressed himself is exemplary. Rather than posing as a philosopher or pundit, Jaccottet reveals his ideas in their personal context of feelings and dreams and anxieties. Despite his extreme uncertainty (and also because of it) he is an articulate thinker of our time - not a great inventive thinker, but an honest individual one.

And besides, his creative writings - the testimony to his quest and the products of it - have literary value. Even discarding the weaker parts, we find many pages which attain, by skill or by miracle, the unusual emotive power of true poetic expression. The volume discussed in this chapter, the three-part A la lumière d'hiver (1977) is no exception: it must now count as one of Jaccottet's principal collections of poetry, alongside L'Ignorant (1958) and Airs (1967).

Of the future we can say little. At the present rate, 1987 may come before he produces another book of comparable importance. And perhaps he will not do so - we have seen that he found it difficult to write in the 1970's, and that the relative success of earlier works made it seem harder still. Perhaps, on the other hand, he may find something new to say, something at first unexpected, and yet true to himself - so that he will join the many writers (particularly in this century) who have flourished creatively late in life.<sup>108</sup>

108. Jaccottet discussed this question in the NRF of Sept. 1961

Jaccottet's first work of the 1980's is not yet to hand, but will be published in 1981 by the Galerie Maeght, with illustrations by Tchao Zao Wou-ki. Its title is certainly promising: Beau Regard.

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108.(contd) (pp.502-6) contrasting Ungaretti, Michaux and Ponge with others who had succumbed, he thought, to "l'outrage des ans".

## BIBLIOGRAPHIES

These lists are arranged in five main sections, as follows:

- I. CREATIVE WRITINGS BY PHILIPPE JACCOTTET, (a) Books, (b) Uncollected poems, and (c) Uncollected prose-texts.
- II. CRITICAL WRITINGS BY JACCOTTET, (a) Essays in book form, (b) Prefaces and articles in books, (c) "Chroniques de Poésie" in the NRF, and (d) Articles and reviews in other periodicals.
- III. TRANSLATIONS BY JACCOTTET.
- IV. CRITICISM OF JACCOTTET'S WRITINGS, (a) Major essays, and (b) Minor articles and reviews, with (c) Translations of works by Jaccottet.
- V. OTHER WORKS CONSULTED.

### I. CREATIVE WRITINGS BY PHILIPPE JACCOTTET

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- 1947 Requiem, Mermod, Lausanne.
- 1953 L'Effraie et autres poésies, Gallimard.
- 1957 La Promenade sous les arbres (Réflexions sur une expérience poétique), Mermod, Lausanne.
- 1958 L'Ignorant (poèmes), Gallimard.
- 1961 Eléments d'un songe, Gallimard.  
L'Obscurité (récit), Gallimard.  
La Promenade sous les arbres (nouvelle édition), Mermod.
- 1963 La Semaïson (carnets 1954-1962), Payot, Lausanne.
- 1964 Paysages de Grignan (avec 12 eaux-fortes de G. de Palézieux), Bibliothèque des Arts, Lausanne.
- 1967 Airs (poèmes 1961-1964), Gallimard.
- 1969 Leçons, Payot, Lausanne.
- 1970 Paysages avec figures absentes, Gallimard.
- 1971 La Semaïson (carnets 1954-1967), Gallimard.  
Poésie 1946-1967, Gallimard.
- 1974 Chants d'en bas, Payot, Lausanne.
- 1975 A travers un verger, Fata morgana, Montpellier.
- 1976 Paysages avec figures absentes (nouvelle édition revue et augmentée), Gallimard.
- 1977 A la lumière d'hiver, précède de Leçons et de Chants d'en

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- 1945 "Les Iris" in La Suisse contemporaine, July 1945, p.614-5.
- 1949 "La Grange" in La Suisse contemporaine, Jan. 1949, p.8.
- 1961 "Entre maintenant dans l'ombre..." in Cahiers du sud, Marseille, June-July 1961, p.375.
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- 1949 "Post-scriptum" in Pour l'art, Lausanne, March-April 1949, p.13.
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## II. CRITICAL WRITINGS BY JACCOTTET

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 1968 L'Entretien des Muses (essai), Gallimard.  
Gustave Roud (présentation) Seghers.  
 1970 Rilke par lui-même, Seuil.

### II (b). PREFACES AND ARTICLES IN BOOKS (excluding books also translated by Jaccottet, which are listed under III, below)

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II (c). "CHRONIQUES DE POESIE" IN LA NOUVELLE REVUE FRANCAISE  
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These reviews by Jaccottet appeared in the following issues:

- 1954 April, July.
- 1955 September, November.
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III TRANSLATIONS BY JACCOTTET

(Most of these contain prefaces by him. Details are given of the first editions only.)

- 1947 Mann, Th. La Mort à Venise, Mermod, Lausanne.
- 1949 Mann, Th. Etudes, Mermod, Lausanne.
- 1950 Coccioli, C. Le Jeu, La Guilde du livre, Lausanne.
- 1951 Traven, B. Le Vaisseau des morts, La Guilde du Livre, Lausanne.
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- 1954 Wälchli, G. Dessins, aquarelles, peintures de Hans Berger, Mermod, Lausanne.

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